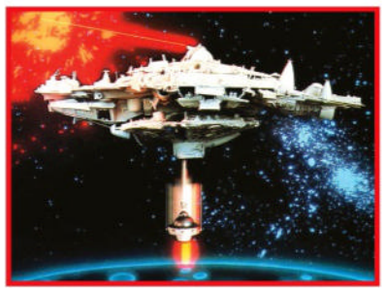
OLD!

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro GAMER



ULTIMATE GUIDE: PHOENIX
ZAPPING BACK TO 1980 FOR A HISTORIC BOSS BATTLE

THE MAKING OF ZOMBI
THE INSIDE STORY OF UBISOFT'S FIRST GAME

A TRIBUTE TO IMAGIC
THE GAMES THAT DEFINED THE SHORT-LIVED STUDIO

THE MAKING OF TOY COMMANDER
HOW TOYS CAME TO LIFE ON SEGA'S DREAMCAST

THE MAKING OF OVERBOARD!
PLAYSTATION PIRACY WITH PSYGNOSIS

FUTURE

LOAD 287

ASSASSIN'S CREED

UBISOFT PIONEERS ON THE BIRTH OF THE ICONIC STEALTH SERIES

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE ASSASSIN'S CREED GAME

DARRAN JONES

You may have already guessed but it's *Black Flag*. I can't wait to get fully stuck into the *Resynced* remake.
Expertise: Juggling a beautiful wife, two gorgeous girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Karate Survivor*
Favourite game of all time: *Strider*

TIM EMPEY

I reviewed the first one and gave it a pretty low score because I finished it in a day. Years later I actually enjoyed *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go.
Currently playing: *Blasphemous II: The Third Sin*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

ANDY SALTER

Maybe *Assassin's Creed II*, I worked on a preview cover of a PC gaming mag… which was nice
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

MARTYN CARROLL

I've only played the first two, so my experience is limited, but I did enjoy the first sequel. I have a bit of catching up to do.
Expertise: Spectrum stuff
Currently playing: *Blasphemous*
Favourite game of all time: *Jet Set Willy*

RORY MILNE

The series standout for me is *Assassin's Creed II*. It just gets so much right with its story-focussed missions, varied combat, rich environments and overall depth of gameplay.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Perfect Dark*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

ANDREW FISHER

I played a lot of *Assassin's Creed II* on Game Pass and really enjoyed it.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *Return to Blacktooth*
Favourite game of all time: *Wizball*

PAUL ROSE

Black Flag, and it's not even close. The best pirate simulator ever.
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*

GRAEME MASON

I have a soft spot for the critically-reviled movie, funnily enough, mainly because of its fantastic cast. I thought it provided some pretty good fan service, and maybe that's what the critics missed.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Explore The Backrooms*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

LOADING...

Time, it's a funny old thing isn't it? It seems like only yesterday that I was writing previews for various Xbox 360 mags about an exciting new game called *Assassin's Creed*, but that was (checks calendar) 19 years ago.

So here we are in 2026 and an update of one of the best games in the series, *Black Flag* in case you were wondering, is sailing into stores. As a result of that fortuitous timing, Jeremy Peel has spoken to critical members of the long-running series to find out what it was like navigating the franchise's first ten years.

If calculated killings or blending into crowds isn't your thing, there's plenty more to enjoy in this issue. We take a look at the perils of tape collecting and quiz Dennis Koble about the many games of Imagic, we go for a flight with Fox McCloud and pals with *Lylat Wars* (the Switch 2 remake arrived just a little too late to be reviewed this month) and we go behind the scenes of *Toy Commander*, *Overboard!* and *Zombi*, which coincidentally, was Ubisoft's first-ever game.

Oh, and you've probably noticed our 32-page magazine dedicated to the SNES and our amazing double-sided poster featuring *Super Mario Kart* and *Secret Of Mana*. Head on over to page 34 and subscribe if you haven't already, that way you'll never miss out on future cool extras.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

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CINEMATIC

Take flight with Fox McCloud

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007 FIRST LIGHT

EMBARK

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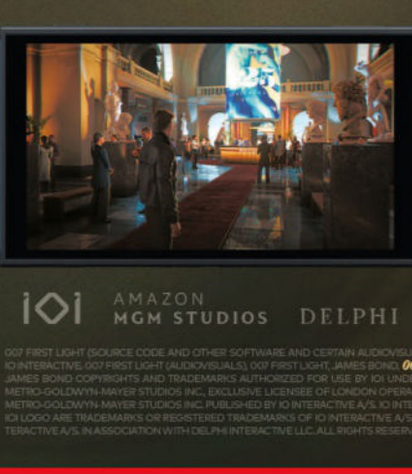

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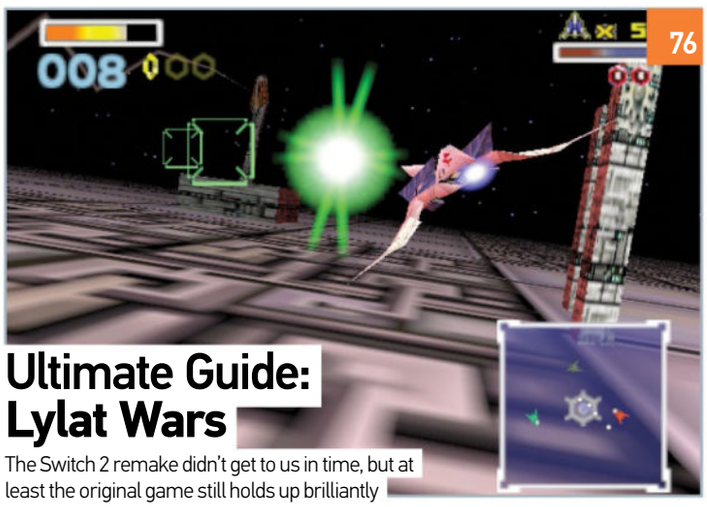

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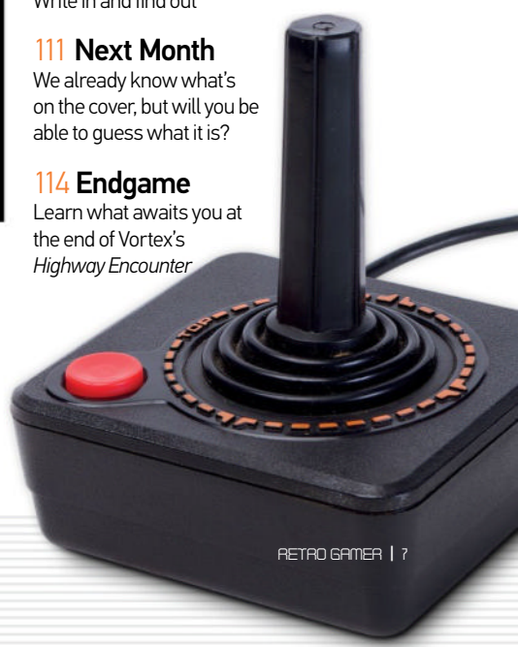
Ultimate Guide: Lylat Wars

The Switch 2 remake didn't get to us in time, but at least the original game still holds up brilliantly



» [PC] It's great to see a new *Castlevania* game dropping just before Halloween.

» [PC] In addition to a whole new world, *Rayman Legends Retold* features brand-new levels where you fly dragons.

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GOOD TIMES AHEAD

There are plenty of retro-related games to look forward to

Words by Darran Jones

E3 may no longer be a thing, but June still has plenty of gaming shows and there are some great retro-related games on the way.

Sony's State Of Play was arguably one of the highlights, with plenty of impressive games shown. Although there was no new information on the planned *God Of War* trilogy remake, *God Of War Laufey* was announced and continues the high-octane escapades of the more recent games, but focusses on Kratos' wife as she attempts to escape the afterlife.

Grand Theft Auto VI wasn't shown, but you could feel its presence, as most of the big games coming out this year are all debuting as far away from its November release date as possible. *Onimusha: Way Of The Sword* and *Silent Hill: Townfall* (along with *Control Resonant*) are all out in September within a day of each other.

Silent Hill: Townfall continues to impress us, from its quaint, mist-enshrouded Scottish setting to its creepy monster design, while *Onimusha: Way Of The Sword* is looking like another essential release from Capcom. There's a demo currently available, which Tim calls "good, but annoyingly short".

One particular highlight of Sony's show was the reveal of Ubisoft's remake of *Rayman Legends*, which we were fortunate enough to have a hands-on play with before its debut. While the new 3D visuals look very beautiful in places, we still prefer the stunning look of the original 13-year-old game. Still, this new edition plays great, has some brand-new sequences and a whole new world to explore.

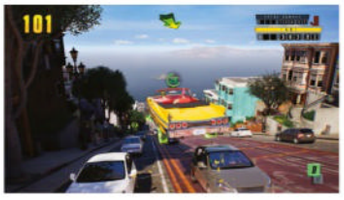
Perhaps the biggest surprise of the show however was the news that a new *Stuntman* game was on the way. Although *Stuntman: Hollywood* didn't show off too much mechanically, it did highlight that developers Sabre Interactive is going all-in with the licensing, showing cars from *Back To The Future*, *Knight Rider*, *Miami Vice*, *The Fast And The Furious* and more.

It wasn't all good news for retro fans however, as Crystal Dynamics revealed that its remake of Lara Croft's first adventure is being delayed until February 2027. The studio also came under fire when the game's Steam Page revealed the use of AI-generated assets, which led to a statement from Crystal Dynamics,

» [PC] A demo for *Onimusha: Way Of The Sword* is currently available if you can't wait until September.

» [Xbox Series X] *Halo: Combat Evolved* remains a legendary shooter, so it's no surprise it's been remade as *Halo: Campaign Evolved*.

» [PlayStation 5] *Stuntman: Hollywood* is going hard with the licensing, featuring cars from *Back To The Future, Miami Vice, Knight Rider* and more.



» [PC] *Crazy Taxi: World Tour*'s use of generative AI isn't making it very popular with fans, the new gameplay trailer hasn't helped, either.

which read, "Any AI-assisted assets were either replaced or refined by humans in order to maintain the creative and artistic vision of the development team."

Tomb Raider delay aside, there was still plenty more to look forward to. *Marvel Tokon: Fighting Souls* dropped a surprise trailer that debuted Doctor Doom and looked utterly gorgeous, while a brand-new trailer for *Ace Combat 8: Wings Of Theve*, also excited us.

Summer Games Fest kicked off in fine style with Capcom showcasing a remake of *Resident Evil Code: Veronica*, one of the worst-kept secrets of recent years. The Geoff Keighley-fronted show also revealed *Final Fantasy VII Revelation*, a continuation of Square Enix's ambitious remake, as well as a new *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game from PlatinumGames and confirmation that *Star Wars Zero Company*, the new strategy game by former *XCOM* developers, will launch in August.

Another big surprise of the show was that there are two new *Cuphead* games on the way. One will be a true sequel to the original hardcore run-and-gun, while the other is a brand-new adventure for Sega's Master System, something Nick would have absolutely loved. Oh, and remember when we mentioned about Fumito Ueda's new game in our *Shadow Of The Colossus* article? Well it's looking like *Gen Atlus* will feature a lone protagonist exploring a desolate world with a mech.

> "Perhaps the biggest surprise of the show however was the news that a new Stuntman game was on the way"

Other games announced included *Virtua Fighter Crossroads*, which looks like it's taken inspiration from both *Yakuza* and *Street Fighter 6* and the first reveal of Sega's *Crazy Taxi* game, which is a reboot of the original. Unfortunately, the reception for it has been rather muted due to the development team revealing that, like *Tomb Raider: Fate Of Atlantis*, it will be using generative AI.

Microsoft's show also had some interesting announcements, although many of the games were known about already. *Gears Of War: E-Day* will finally debut in October, *Halo: Campaign Evolved* will launch in July and will introduce space combat in its prequel sections, while *Fable* is due for release in February 2027.

Spyro: A Realm Beyond is the first new game in the series for 18 years, while a remake of *Persona 4* will drop in February 2027. On the subject of *Persona*, the sixth game in the series was revealed and is looking mighty impressive. While we're on the subject of impressive-looking games. *Castlevania: Belmont's Curse* is out in October and also looks fantastic.

So there you have it, there's a tremendous amount of games to look forward to over the coming months and you can expect to see most reviewed in future issues.

THE OLD GUARD RETURN

Quake and Quakecon both turn 30 this year and id Software has big things planned for its famous yearly event. It was recently announced that *Quake*'s cofounders, John Carmack, John Romero, Tom Hall and Adrian Carmack will all be attending the show. John Romero revealed on Twitter that it's the first time they've all been together since 1993!

RAGE FOREVER

They say no news is good news and there's finally been an update on Lionsgate's long-gestating *Streets Of Rage* movie. Variety has reported that directing duties will be handled by Jeymes Samuel (the younger brother of singer Seal), while Pat Casey and Josh Miller, the writers behind *Sonic The Hedgehog*, are working on a new script. There's still no news of an actual release date as of yet.

Who is Mike Mika?
Mike Mika's official videogame career began in the Nineties, working on Game Boy Color titles like *Klax* and *Alice In Wonderland*. He's now the studio head of Digital Eclipse, a studio acclaimed for its reverential treatment of classic games.

A Super Auction story

One thing that kept surprising me about living in California was the sheer volume of arcade machines just… everywhere. My friend had an *Altered Beast* in his kitchen, covered in pizza boxes. Walking past open garages with at least one or two games was common.

Whenever I asked where they came from, the most common answer was, "Super Auction." People spoke about finding games with the grandeur of exaggerated fishing tales. "I got a *Defender* off Craigslist for a hundred bucks!" Someone else found a *Donkey Kong* cocktail cabinet on the side of the road with a "free" sign taped to it. "And it worked!" The Bay Area had been home to countless arcade operators with an overabundance of games. They didn't seem rare here. They were just indigenous. If I could go back in time, I'd warn myself how temporary it all was.

A chance encounter with an old operator delivering a game to our office resulted in him giving me a *Pong*, a *Double Dragon*, an *Ice Cold Beer* and a Neo Geo with one simple request, "Please take these from me so I don't have to take them to the dump." It was a dangerous introduction.

Not long afterwards, a few friends and I heard about an upcoming Super Auction. It would be our first rodeo. We rented a truck and headed south to Silicon Valley. My friend cared about one game: his Holy Grail, *Battlezone*.

The auction itself was like all those dreams I had as a kid. A giant warehouse full of arcade machines. The cacophony of sound from rows of games filled the building as people tested them before bidding started. We barely had time to soak it in when the bidding started. We got crushed game after game. Everything we wanted quickly exceeded our budgets. But *Battlezone* was near the end, so we agreed we'd pool our money if necessary. Then I learned how Super Auctions worked. If nobody bid on a machine, it got added to the next bid. Nobody wanted a giant UFO catcher. Made sense. They were huge.

Then nobody wanted that combination. Or the next. Soon a *Cyber Sled* joined the pile. Then *Qix*. Then *Jungle Hunt*. Every unwanted machine became attached to the next unwanted machine, and each time it was less about the games and more about the burden of taking an entire row of machines.

People started leaving. Bidders folded their arms, waiting for the chain to break. Nobody wanted the growing pile of machines. The bid never breached a dollar. In fact, it only reached a dollar once. When my friend raised his paddle.

Suddenly we not only owned *Battlezone*, but an arcade's worth of machines. The exhilaration was fleeting as the task ahead sank in. We needed to remove every machine within the hour. We couldn't possibly take them all, and offering strangers the games for free yielded no response.

We rolled them out one by one with a single handcart and somehow loaded nearly everything into our truck. *Cyber Sled* was never going to fit, so it was adopted by some passing carnival workers from down the street who happily dragged it away.

Exhausted and sweaty, we were ready to go. Then our rental truck died. Like, really died. We unloaded everything, waited for a replacement, then loaded everything again.

By that point all we could do was laugh. And hurt. Those machines were really heavy. Over the years, the games scattered to new homes. A photo booth spent years in our office lobby. *Battlezone* went home with my friend, which was the entire reason we'd gone to the Super Auction in the first place. When I first moved to California, I'd listen to stories about Super Auctions. And now here I am telling one. Back then, those machines felt impossible to get rid of. Today, some of them are nearly impossible to find. The repair specialists retired, the warehouses were razed and rebuilt as tech campuses, and the brief moment when nobody thought these games were worth saving disappeared with them. ✱

> "When I first moved to California, I'd listen to stories about Super Auctions. And now here I am telling one"

Do you agree with Mike's thoughts? Contact us at:

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NINTENDO CALLS TIME

OCARINA REMAKE IS REVEALED AT DIRECT PRESENTATION

Following Sony and Microsoft's showcases, Nintendo delivered its latest Direct presentation on 9 June – and closed it out in style by confirming that a remake of *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* is coming this year. No gameplay footage was shared but an image of young Link was shown and, as is customary, fans were instantly debating his new look online. It seems like we won't have to wait long to see how Nintendo revisits one of its most-beloved creations (with utmost care and attention, we wager).

A number of other Switch 2 exclusives were also announced, including a return to Wuhu Island in *Nintendo Switch Sports Resort*, and a new single-player focussed *Splatoon* game, *Splatoon Raiders*. Aside from the *Ocarina* reveal, the highlight was probably the announcement of *Xenoblade Genesis*, the latest chapter in Monolith's revered RPG series, due out next year (and preceded by Switch 2 versions of the three *Xenoblade Chronicles* games). We were also delighted to see the return of Piku in the upcoming *Pikuniku 2*. Elsewhere it was announced that *Fire Emblem: Fortune's Weave* would be arriving on 17 September.

A number of multiformat titles were also teased, including *Kingdom Hearts IV*, *Dragon's Dogma 2: Dark Arisen* and *Final Fantasy Resonance*. The *Final Fantasy* title is not a new game, but an update of the 2015 mobile F2P game *Final Fantasy Brave Exvius*, featuring HD-2D graphics (the first game in the series to do so). It's out on 22 October.

» [Switch 2] The impressive-looking *Xenoblade Genesis* was announced to the delight of RPG fans.

» [Switch 2] A conversation starter! Young Link is glimpsed in the *Ocarina Of Time* teaser.

» Twin Galaxies founder Walter Day (middle right), with UK Kong Off champion Jannick.

» Arcade Club in Bury hosted the event, which featured eight original *Donkey Kong* arcade cabs.

UK KONG KING CROWNED

FIRST KONG OFF HELD AT ARCADE CLUB IN BURY

The Kong Off tournaments, which see the best *Donkey Kong* players battle it out for the highest scores on Nintendo's coin-op, have been held regularly in the US since 2010. In May the first-ever UK Kong Off took place, attracting players from across Europe and even as far as Australia. Twin Galaxies legend Walter Day flew over from the States to attend.

With about an hour of the event to go, UK player Roanbag set a score of 809,400 and went straight into first place. Then Swedish player Pingey played an amazing game, falling two screens short of the kill screen and scoring 835,400. Meanwhile, Jannick, the reigning Danish Kong Off champion, quietly kept playing under increasing pressure and started to creep towards the kill screen. With Walter and a large crowd watching on, Jannick held his nerve and made it to the kill screen. His score of 898,600 saw him crowned the UK Kong Off champion, winning him a real *Donkey Kong* arcade cab.

The event concluded with Walter handing out trophies to the top three players. He also gave a speech on the importance of keeping the spirit of arcades and arcade gaming alive. The success of the first UK Kong Off suggests it probably won't be the last.

Thanks to Retro Russ and Oli 8BitBoyUK for sharing details of the day's events.

ALIENS ARCHIVE

A book about the many games based on the *Aliens* franchise is on its way. Written by **RG** contributor Mike Diver, *Aliens: The Video Games* covers every game from the first official *Alien* licence for the Atari 2600 to the recent *Alien: Rogue Incursion*. There's even a chapter on *Predator* games. The in-depth write-ups are supplemented by more than 20 all-new developer interviews. Mike's unofficial guide will be available from White Owl Books in August.

COMMODORE CALLS BACK

Commodore International has unveiled another new product – but it's not a reimagined micro. The Commodore Callback 8020 is a retro-styled flip phone which lists "no social media, no email, no browser and no apologies" as its selling points. What it does come with is a curated collection of built-in Commodore 64 games and a SID chiptune player (which means, yes, SID ringtones are back in fashion). The device will be available later this year.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Sorry, lad

Anyone who ever glances at this column will know how important gaming with my kids is to me. I have never had a problem sitting down either in the same room, or as life took me physically further away from them, playing games online. I've completed *A Way Out* with my youngest at least five times. I know, I know, he's too young for it, please don't report me. We also finished *Split Fiction* and *It Takes Two*.

These are wonderful games that can't help but bring a child and parent closer.

The boys are 14 and 16 now, and our gaming relationship has shifted slightly. Let's start with the eldest. He's in the middle of his GCSEs, is 6'6" and works out at the gym. He is HUGE and could easily beat me in a fight. He's at the tipping point between being a child and a man, and he knows it. This summer really will be the one where he crosses that threshold.

He's aware where he is and is doing his best to cling onto his childhood before it completely slips away. He's just got massively into Lego again after a break of about five years. Not the official stuff, we ain't made of money. No, he buys hooky Ligo from some website or other. His latest purchase is a Galactic Condor from the infamous *Galaxy Battles* series. As well as building Lego, sorry, Ligo, he's also playing the old *Lego Star Wars* and *Lego Marvel Avengers* games. He was thrilled when he found them and excitedly gives me daily updates. When he asked if I wanted to go over during half term and play with him, I had to admit I teared up a bit. It was magical. We laughed a lot, shouted at how unfair some bits were, and kept promising not to kill each other before… yeah… killing each other.

My youngest, who I always spent more time playing games with, is in a different stage of his development. We went to see *Backrooms* at the weekend, an absolutely brilliant film that has given me nightmares for the last two nights. I saw there were a couple of *Backrooms* games available. I messaged my son and asked if he knew about them. "Yeah, I'm playing them with some friends."

When I sent a sad emoji back, his reply was simple and one he uses on me a lot.

"Sorry, lad."

I don't know if all kids are saying this or it's just some weird thing he does on his own. Every time he does it, I burst out laughing. I had a similar experience last week when I asked what music he was into. When he told me he likes Fakemink and his best song was *Blow Me*, I spat my tea out.

Rarely do these pieces have any moral or point to them.

This one does.

Hold your kids close. When they ask to play a game, say yes. Turn your phone off, close the laptop, switch the telly off and play. Stay up late and play. Because one day when you ask them to play you may get a "sorry, lad".

> "Split Fiction and It Takes Two are wonderful games to bring a child and parent closer"

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

A golden time

It's a weird thing, but very few of my oldest mates are big gamers, and never were. Most of us had a computer growing up, but I was pretty much the only one who played games seriously back then, and the only one who continued playing games into adulthood. My oldest friend, Jon, had an Oric-1. I had a mate called Phil who had a Commodore 64. I once went round to the house of a boy called Peter Lemon, because he owned *Jet Set Willy* and I didn't. And there was a Michael Conabeer who invited me round because he'd rented *The Empire Strikes Back* for the Atari VCS.

A bit later, when I was still playing about with my Spectrum, I was semi-friends with a bunch of BBC Model B-owning poshos. Oh, how they loved to lord it over me.

Most of the friends from school that I'm still friends with never really showed interest in games then or now. Music was more their thing. However, there have been two games that I know they played, because they played them at my house, after a few beers.

The first of these was *Rock Band* – but I don't even know if that can really be classed as a game in the traditional sense. It's more wish fulfilment, and I bought it precisely because I knew they'd enjoy it.

But the other was *GoldenEye 007*. I've been thinking about it a lot lately, because I've been playing the new *Bond* game, *007 First Light*. It's mostly really good by the way, albeit strictly a single-player narrative. It's basically a *Bond* movie simulator.

GoldenEye 007 did a decent job of following the vague plot of the movie it was based upon, but most of us weren't there for the story. I find *007 First Light*'s omission of multiplayer somewhat odd, given that the magic of *GoldenEye 007* was in its four-on-four shooting matches.

In fact, it's because of *GoldenEye* that I've never really gotten into online gaming in a big way. In all the times I've played online, nothing has ever come close to the rush, the laughs, the sheer joy of playing a four-player split-screen game of *GoldenEye* with a few Molsons in your system. Online, I always come away feeling kind of disappointed and – inevitably – humiliated by younger, better, players.

Do games even bother with split-screen anymore? You'd think they should, given that our tellies are bigger than they were back then, but the multiplayer always seems to be online. Unless it's a Switch, and you're sharing Joy-Cons.

There is no way I'd have ever gotten any of my friends to get online. I mean, they'd have had to own a console or a computer capable of running games. And the game.

GoldenEye brought us together – literally and figuratively. That's what split-screen did. It didn't just let you play against your friends. It made gaming something that happened in the room, with all the swearing, laughing, gloating and sulking that came with it. Online gaming may be more convenient, but it has never once made me spill beer on my daughter's teddy bear. And she has never let me forget it. *

> "GoldenEye did a decent job of following the vague plot of the movie, but most of us weren't there for the story"

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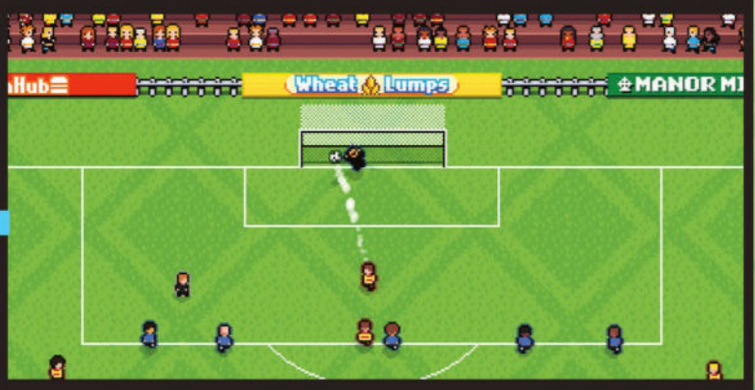

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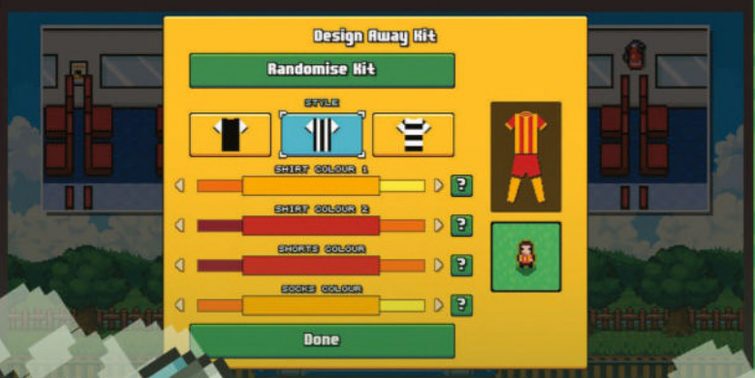

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SECRET MODE

» [PC] *The Darkside Detective: A Fumble In The Dark* sees the dynamic duo exploring nine new cases.

» From left to right, Spooky Door consists of Paul Conway, Treasa McCabe and Dave McCabe. The studio is based in Galway, Ireland.

Spooky Doorway

Dave McCabe and Paul Conway discuss their pixel-art classics

Words by Darran Jones

Based in Ireland, Spooky Doorway is best known for its *Darkside Detective* games and the recently released *The Séance Of Blake Manor*. With a demo for its third *Darkside Detective* game out now, we decided to chat to Dave McCabe and Paul Conway about their popular games.

Can you tell us where the concept for the *Darkside Detective* games originated?
Dave McCabe: It came from a short game jam. There wasn't much time to work on something, so the simple style, the no faces, animations, etc, all came from those restrictions. That demo went online and people clicked with it. Then we had to discuss what kind of game it actually was. The bones were there – supernatural detective – but so much had to be built up around it.

The humour in all your games remind us of Lucasfilm classics like *The Secret Of Monkey Island*. Is that intentional?
DM: No, not at all. I actually didn't even play those as a kid so they weren't in my mind one bit. I had a lot of sitcoms and novels in my mind more than games as I was working on it. I wanted the world to feel like *The Simpsons* or Discworld, with this cast of weirdos who would return from time to time. It was kinda *Twin Peaks* turned up a notch, it has a lot of humour and weirdos in it!

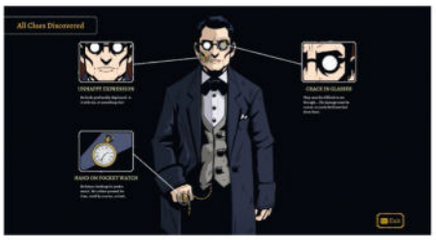
Your games are known for their distinctive, pixel-art look. What is it that you like about the medium?
Paul Conway: I love that the low resolution and super-flat orthographic style abstracts the art in a fun way. Everything is like an icon. The style we use is simple and super quick to create, but I think players sort of fill in the gaps themselves and invent a lot of the details and charm in their minds. It's sort of like in horror movies when you don't see the monster for most of the film, your imagination makes it more terrifying, but in *Darkside* it's a cosy, more positive/less terrifying version of that.

How long does the development process take and what challenges do you typically face?
DM: Each game has had a different dev time for various reasons. The first game we made in our spare time, which slowed things down.

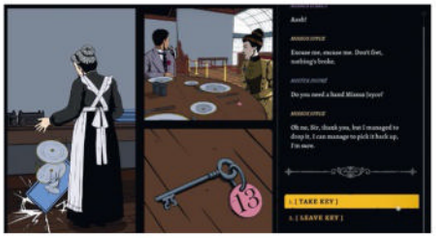
The second game was developed alongside other titles. Game 3 is more focussed, which has been a nice change of pace.

After the success of *Darkside Detective*, did you face much pressure while working on *A Fumble In The Dark*?
DM: Usual second album stuff

> "It was kinda Twin Peaks turned up a notch, it has a lot of humour and weirdos in it!"
>
> **DAVE MCCABE**



» [PC] Unlike Spooky Doorway's *Darkside Detective* games, *The Séance Of Blake Manor* has a first-person perspective.



» [PC] The comic-book-style panels of *Blake's Manor* look excellent and add to the game's atmosphere.

» [PC] There are numerous interesting items you can use in *The Darkside Detective* series, but what do you use them for?

– will it be as good, can we stay uninfluenced by people's feedback, do we have more jokes and ideas that fit. We had to work on it alongside other projects which also added its own pressure.

Why have you set *The Séance Of Blake Manor* in 1897 Ireland? What did this particular setting offer over your *Darkside Detective* games?

DM: Well, we always wanted to make something set here. We were getting tired of seeing it represented inauthentically and wanted to do something about that. The Victorian era is perfect for ghost stories and spiritualism. 1897 is the year Dracula came out, which was a nice nod but as a time in Ireland it's nestled between the famine and the revolution, so it has breathing space to be its own thing while also being influenced by those things.

Can we expect to see any sequels to the game, after all the good reviews it received?

DM: Hard to say. We have more stories in that world but also lots of stories and game ideas for elsewhere and elsewhen. There's a lot to be considered and discussed but who knows, it might happen!

You clearly have a fantastic knack for writing engaging mysteries, what is it you like about the genre?

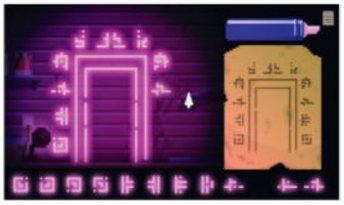
DM: The challenge of finding new stories to tell, new twists and escalations to keep a player wondering where it's gonna go next. It's hard to do that and not pull the rug out on a player – an unfair twist is no fun. The player has to be able to get close with their guesses but also be surprised by what comes. Bringing a player on that journey is good fun.

When will *Backside Of The Moon* release and what will it offer over the previous *Darkside Detective* games?

What it offers is more fun stories in that world. We don't intend to mix up the formula all that much, [as] we think we're getting better at making them, so the cases should be good fun!

As for when, [that] depends on what unexpected travesties hit the world next. A lot of power-hungry villains keep making life hard on the rest of us but hopefully it's safe to say "somewhere in 2027". ✱

» [PC] The humour in *Backside Of The Moon* is just as good as in the earlier games.



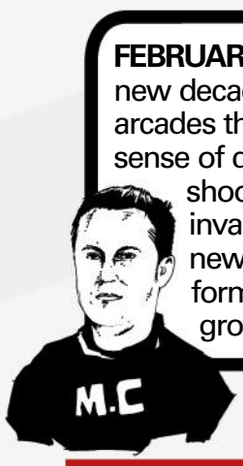
» [PC] You'll find numerous simple puzzles to complete as you go through case files.

» [PC] There's plenty of fourth-wall breaking in the series, and it's sometimes very humorous.

» [PC] *The Darkside Detective* introduced gamers to detective Francis McQueen and officer Dooley.

» [PC] The current demo lets you play part of the first case and shouldn't take too long to finish.

BACK TO BACK TO THE EIGHTIES



FEBRUARY 1980 – It's a new decade but inside the arcades there's a lingering sense of déjà vu, as space shooters continue to invade. Meanwhile, new businesses are formed to feed the growing home market

THE MONTH'S HIGHLIGHTS

IN THE WORLD

News In Brief

The 13th Winter Olympics take place in New York, with figure skater Robin Cousins winning gold for Great Britain. Original AC/DC frontman Bon Scott dies in London, aged 33. TV quiz show *Play Your Cards Right* airs on ITV for the first time, hosted by Bruce Forsyth.

IN THE CHARTS

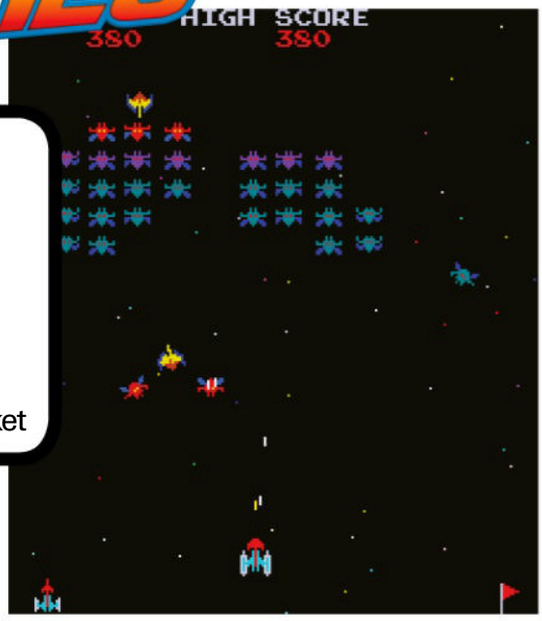
The Gambler Collects

Crossover hit *Coward Of The County* by Kenny Rogers is the UK's top-selling single this month. Blondie's *Call Me* is in fourth spot, but it will go on to become one of the year's biggest hits, especially in the US where it tops the Billboard Hot 100 for six straight weeks.

IN THE CINEMA

An Unseasonal Success

Debuting at the top of the UK box office this month is summer camp comedy *Meatballs*, directed by Ivan Reitman and starring Bill Murray. Over in the UK, *American Gigolo* is the number one movie. Its success establishes star Richard Gere as a leading man.



» [Arcade] Receiving a wide international release this month, *Galaxian* becomes a huge arcade hit for Namco.

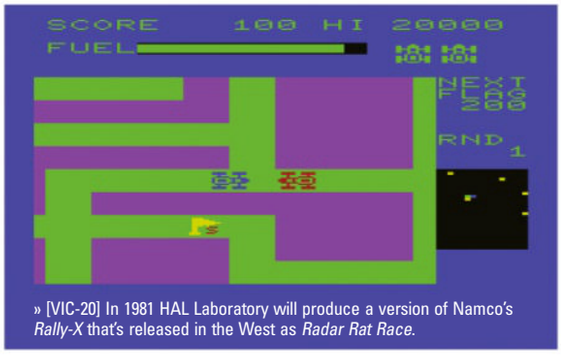
FEBRUARY 1980

Galaxian takes flight and HAL Laboratory is hatched

The *Space Invaders* boom continues unabated. January saw the arrival of Taito's official sequel, *Space Invaders: Part II*, and now this month Westerners get to play perhaps the king of all the *Invaders* clones, *Galaxian* from Namco. The game's creator Kazunori Sawano will go on record to state that he began work on *Galaxian* before *Space Invaders* was released, and that he was more influenced by the original *Star Wars* movie. The space battles he saw on-screen inspired his aliens who don't just advance slowly in a rank and file formation, but swoop down and target the player's ship. Sawano also reveals that his aliens originally resembled TIE fighters before they evolved into insect-like creatures – a decision Namco's legal team no doubt appreciated as the game becomes a huge hit around the world. Following its success with *Space Invaders*, Midway licenses *Galaxian* for its US release and experiences similar levels of success. The game goes on to become the second highest-grossing arcade game of the year in the US (behind Atari's all-conquering *Asteroids*). Unit sales will top 50,000 by the end of 1981.

Japan is certainly not done with Invader-style games. February sees the Japanese debut of *Moon Cresta* from Nichibutsu. This new blaster builds on *Galaxian* by introducing a three-stage ship, which the player builds (via a docking minigame) as they progress through the alien waves. As with *Galaxian*, the game will be licensed for release around the world and become another space-themed coin magnet.

Staying in Japan, videogame developer HAL Laboratory is formed on 21 February. The company, which counts future Nintendo president Satoru Iwata among its early employees, establishes its name outside of its home country by developing games for the Commodore PET and VIC-20 computers (naturally, this includes clones of *Space Invaders*, *Galaxian* and other arcade hits of the era). HAL later connects with Nintendo and they form a long and successful partnership that produces the *Kirby*, *Mother* and *Super Smash Bros* series – but it all begins this month, with a few computer geeks operating out of a small apartment in the Chiyoda ward of Tokyo. ✱



» [VIC-20] In 1981 HAL Laboratory will produce a version of Namco's *Rally-X* that's released in the West as *Radar Rat Race*.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF FEBRUARY 1980

Genie Out The Bottle

Practical Computing takes a closer look at the Video Genie, the TRS-80 Model I clone that's recently gone on sale in the UK for £425. "By present-day prices, the Video Genie is welcome and, as a general-purpose computer, good value." At the time of writing, the magazine wouldn't know that Sinclair Research is about to introduce the ZX80 for £99.95.

Atari Coins It In

Atari reveals in *Coin Connection* that *Asteroids* has broken all production records. "To date we've produced more *Asteroids* than any other game in our history, and the orders are still piling up," buzzed Atari sales manager Don Osbourne. The vector game, created by Ed Logg and Lyle Rains, will earn Atari an estimated $150 million in sales over its lifetime.

New Apple To Drop?

Byte magazine has heard whispers about a new Apple computer. Apparently, the Cupertino-based firm is about to reveal the Apple III, the successor to the hugely popular Apple II line. The rumours turn out to be true and Apple will formally announce the machine in May (although, with the benefit of hindsight, it perhaps should have paused plans… indefinitely).

Scott's Back

Softside features its usual selection of type-in listings, only this month the magazine has managed to land a celebrity author. The *Backgammon* listing has been written by Scott Adams of *Adventure International* fame. The listing even includes his phone number. We wonder how many people called him up to ask how to cure chigger bites in *Adventureland*?

Broder Formed

Doug and Gary Carlston establish Broderbund Software in San Rafael, California, to release Doug's own strategy game *Galactic Empire* and its sequels. The company quickly rises in stature, publishing such hits as *Choplifter*, *Lode Runner*, *Prince Of Persia* and *Myst*.

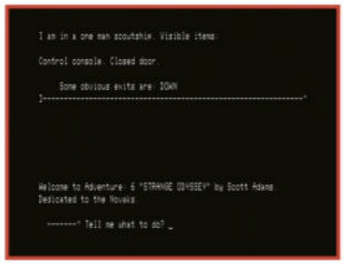
Lunar Rip-Off?

Taito returns with another arcade space game, *Lunar Rescue*. This one features two stages: the first resembles Atari's *Lunar Lander* and the second is – surprise! – similar to its own *Space Invaders*. It plays well, but fails to emulate the sales success of its sources.

Intellivision Lives

Although it was first unveiled at the CES show in January 1979, Mattel's machine only starts to arrive in select US markets this month. Its release sparks what has since been dubbed 'the first console war', as Mattel tries to take on Atari at this home videogame lark.

Scott On Top

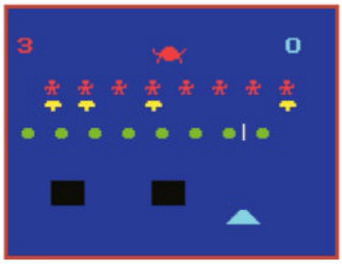


Tandy TRS-80 owners can't get enough of Scott Adams' adventures, with *Voodoo Castle* and *Strange Odyssey* occupying the top two slots on this month's TRS-80 sales chart. These releases are text-only, but Adams will later rerelease his games with location graphics.

Guns Of Navarone

It's 1980 and Namco continues to release monochrome coin-op games. Despite its black-and-white graphics, *Navarone* is quite nifty as players attack the central base from the bottom of the screen and each side. The game is not released outside of Japan.

Odyssey Invaders



Magnavox gets in on the *Space Invaders* act with this clone for its Odyssey 2 console (aka the Videopac G7000). In a twist, when the player's ship is hit, the pilot bails out and is able to turn one of the bases into a new ship. The mothership is also a proper menace in this one.

Falstein Moves Up

Game designer Noah Falstein graduates from Hampshire College in February 1980 and takes a job at Milton Bradley one week later. He will go on to carve out a distinguished career in videogames, designing *Sinistar* for Williams and multiple titles for Lucasfilm Games.

Sink The Bismarck

Released for the TRS-80 and Apple II this month is *Computer Bismarck*, a turn-based strategy title developed by SSI. Depicting the last battle of the battleship Bismarck in 1941, it is regarded as the first professionally packaged computer wargame to hit the market.

Atic Atac

BECOME THE CASTLE MASTER

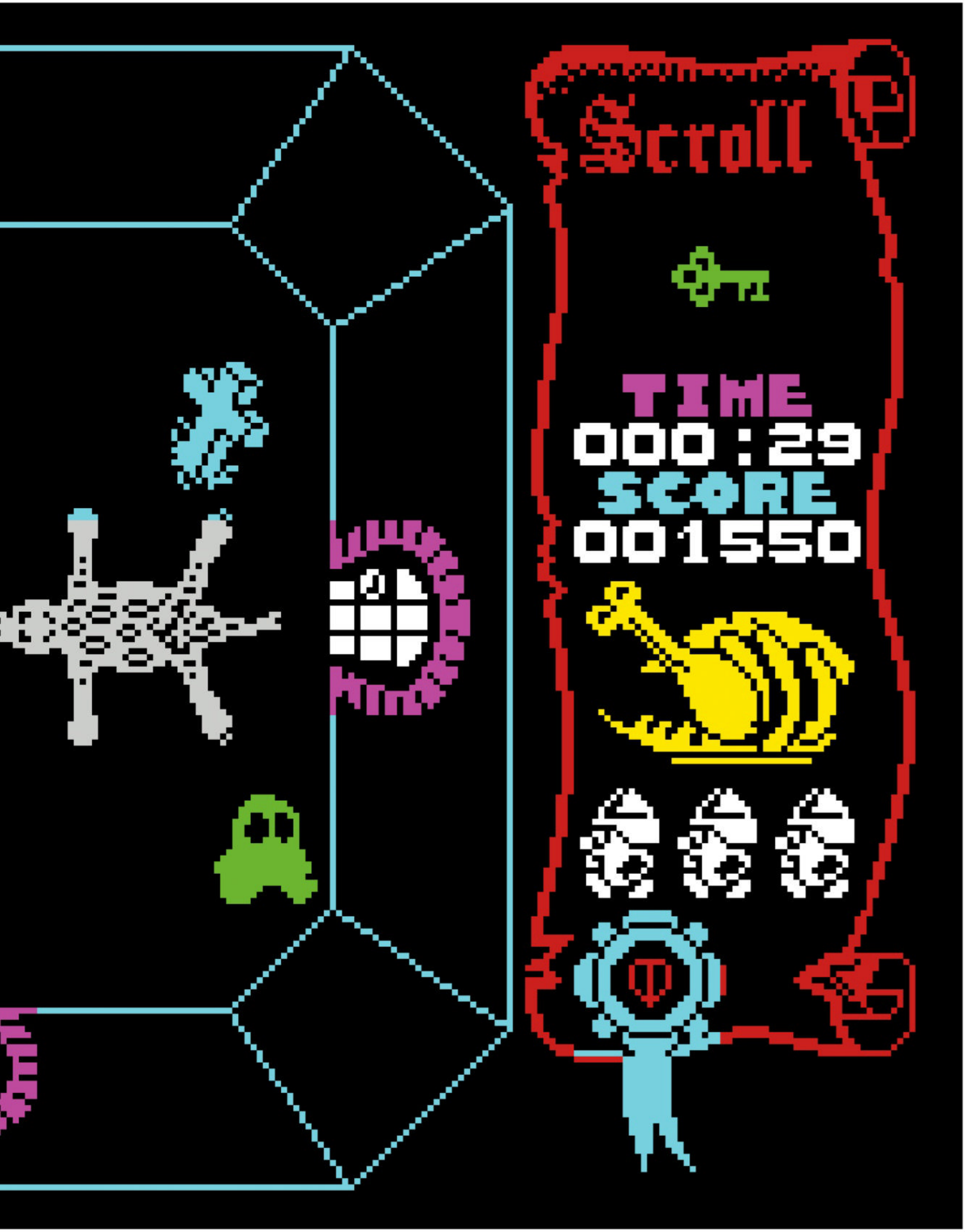
» ZX SPECTRUM » 1983
» ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

At the height of its Spectrum heyday, Ultimate released two brilliant maze games back to back: *Atic Atac* and *Sabre Wulf*. Fans remain torn over which is the better game, but Ultimate clearly viewed *Sabre Wulf* as superior, as it was the first to be sold in premium 'big box' packaging for £9.95 (compared to the usual £5.50 in a single jewel case).

Sabre Wulf is a great game, obviously, featuring a huge jungle map and lots of neat touches, but I've always preferred *Atic Atac* and its creepy castle. The objective in both games is the same: search the enemy-filled maze for pieces of a special item that unlocks the exit. They're both arcade games, but *Atic Atac* places more emphasis on adventure. You can pick up items that actually have a use rather than just score you points, for a start. There are coloured keys which open corresponding coloured doors, plus special items which will thwart the castle's more famous inhabitants – use the cross to repel Dracula and the wrench to thwack Frankenstein. I remember one bit, where you had to lure a monster away from an important doorway using a specific item, felt like a text adventure puzzle made real.

You can also choose to play as one of three character types: Wizard, Knight or Serf. They're all basically the same, except each one can access their own secret passages throughout the castle, which benefits repeat play. There are also stairs and trapdoors that connect the castle's five floors.

Atic Atac uses a health system, cleverly depicted by a cooked chicken that exposes its carcass as your energy ebbs away. *Sabre Wulf*, meanwhile, swaps this out for lives and one-hit kills. For me this is the key differentiator. In *Atic Atac*, the health system encourages you to venture forth and explore the castle's hidden depths, while in *Sabre Wulf* you're always playing defensively, trying not to get blindsided by a jungle critter. It's mainly for this reason that I played *Atic Atac* much more, and I think it's the only Ultimate game that I managed to complete as a kid. I'm still stuck in *Sabre Wulf*...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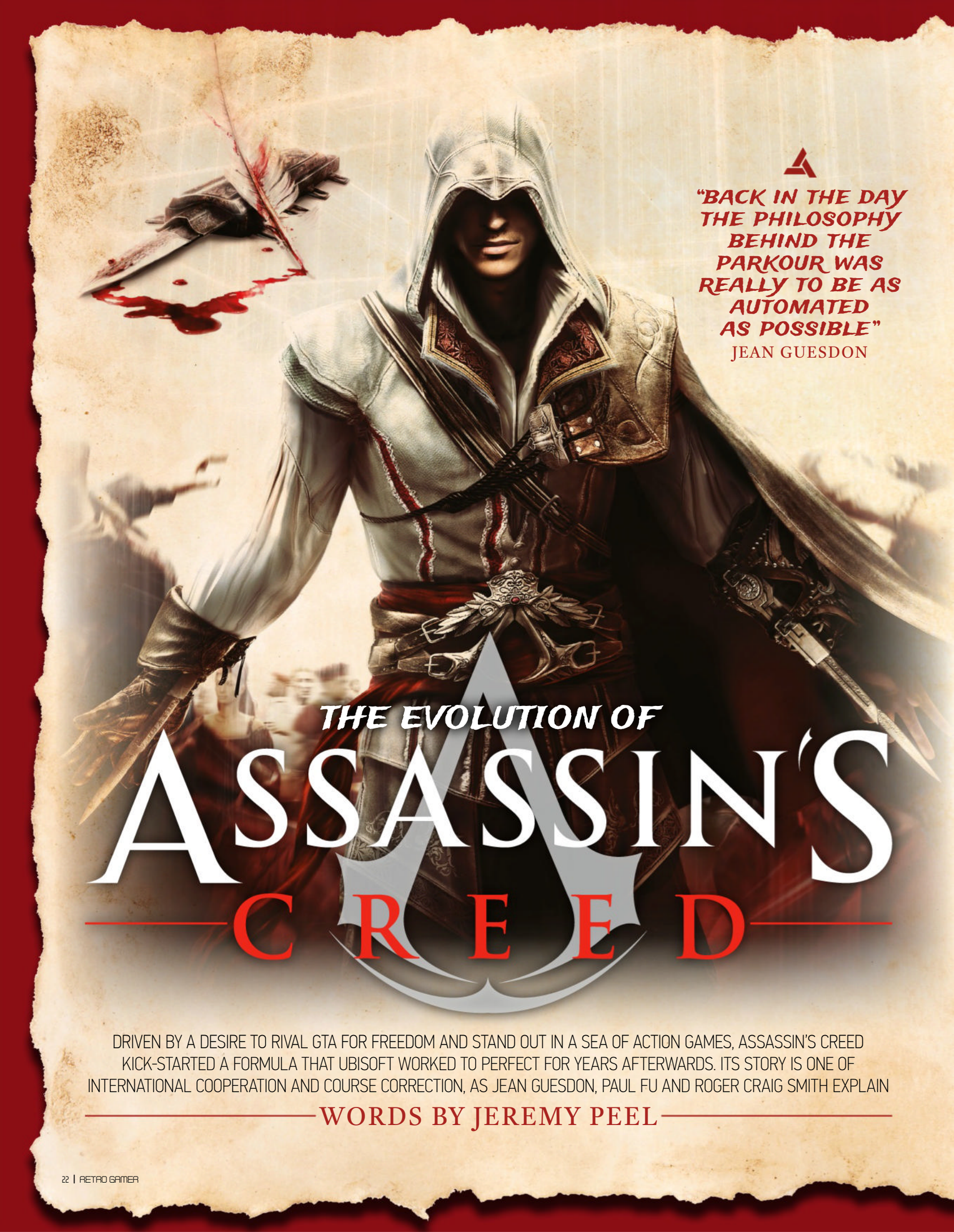


"BACK IN THE DAY THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE PARKOUR WAS REALLY TO BE AS AUTOMATED AS POSSIBLE"
JEAN GUESDON

THE EVOLUTION OF ASSASSIN'S CREED

DRIVEN BY A DESIRE TO RIVAL GTA FOR FREEDOM AND STAND OUT IN A SEA OF ACTION GAMES, ASSASSIN'S CREED KICK-STARTED A FORMULA THAT UBISOFT WORKED TO PERFECT FOR YEARS AFTERWARDS. ITS STORY IS ONE OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND COURSE CORRECTION, AS JEAN GUESDON, PAUL FU AND ROGER CRAIG SMITH EXPLAIN

WORDS BY JEREMY PEEL

» [PC] Tipping an enemy off a ledge is one of the series' illicit pleasures

It doesn't take the eyesight of an eagle to see that *Assassin's Creed* was very odd indeed. Patrice Désilets' vision of targeted murder in the Holy Land was dressed as a stealth game, yet plunged you into swordfights on the streets of Jerusalem. It mapped the face buttons of your controller to different parts of the human body: Triangle for actions involving the head, Square and Circle for working the arms, and Cross for activating the feet. It presented not a health bar, but a synchronisation meter that measured your capacity to mimic the life story of an ancient ancestor. In a medium defined by careful iteration, *Assassin's Creed* appeared to have been invented from whole Damascene cloth.

"There was indeed a clear will from Patrice, the original creative director, to be as unique as possible," says the series' head of content, Jean Guesdon. He points to the game's multilayered narrative structure, spanning the present day and genetic memories; its realistic historical setting, and the 'grey' central struggle between societal control and self-determination. "*Assassin's Creed* was an attempt to bring on the next-gen of the time," he says. "A true new type of experience, starting with this incredible parkour ability, which made navigating a 3D world super intuitive."

With the open-world genre still taking shape, Désilets looked to the freedom of *GTA*: could the assassin be like a car, and take the player anywhere they wanted to go? "Back in the day the philosophy behind the parkour was really to be as automated as possible," Jean says. "We didn't want the players to be asked to time inputs. Freedom was about deciding where you wanted to go and then the system would do the magic for you."

Some scoffed at the apparent simplicity of holding down a single button to traverse an angular rooftop or scale a turret. But Ubisoft Montreal was mindful of the cognitive load it was placing on players, who were simultaneously planning their routes around guards and distant objectives. "One of the ▶

» [PC] In the early games, targets would reveal their own corruption and hubris during elaboration speech sequences.

» [PC] In the first game, Altaïr couldn't swim, which restricted your routes through cities.

■ Jean Guesdon is currently the head of content for the *Assassin's Creed* series and has been involved with Ubisoft's franchise since *Assassin's Creed II*.

■ Paul Fu is another longtime member of the *Assassin's Creed* team, having started on *Brotherhood*. He's currently the co-director of the remake of Black Flag.

Stages Of Evolution:
CREEDER'S DIGEST
2007-2011

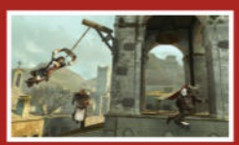
THE EARLY ADVENTURES

ASSASSIN'S CREED

Excitement built long in advance of Ubisoft's lavish next-gen offering. The publisher coined the term 'social stealth' during its E3 presentation in 2006, and despite some pacing flaws, delivered on the idea of going unnoticed in the crowd – as well as leaping across the rooftops.

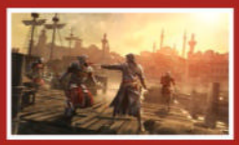
ASSASSIN'S CREED II

Rarely has a formula been so profoundly improved in such a short space of time. *Assassin's Creed II* ditched the sombre tone of its predecessor, as well as the rather tedious and repetitive investigation phase that preceded every titular assassination. Players lapped it up.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD

Sticking with Renaissance Italy as its backdrop, Ubisoft Montreal relocated the action to Rome, as fiery protagonist Ezio brought the fight to the Borgias. The scale and magnificence of the capital, and variety of its activities, made *Brotherhood* the high point of *Assassin's Creed*'s early period.



ASSASSIN'S CREED REVELATIONS

The first signs of fatigue with Ubisoft's model set in here. Critics found fault with the familiarity of *Revelations*' offering – dismissing the gimmicky hook blade, and growing weary of the busywork involved in land management. Nonetheless, the appeal of playing through Ezio's swan song carried the day.

» [PC] Combat felt a lot more refined in *Assassin's Creed II*.

» [PC] Ezio was a highly skilled protagonist, being just as athletic as Altair.

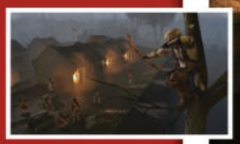
"THE SYSTEMATIC USE OF HISTORIANS, PRE-PRODUCTION ON-SITE VISITS, AND A CLEAR POSITION REGARDING HISTORY REALLY STARTED WITH ASSASSIN'S CREED II"

JEAN GUESDON

STAGES OF EVOLUTION: CREEDER'S DIGEST 2012-2014

THE SERIES BRANCHES OUT

ASSASSIN'S CREED III



A curiously segmented experience, *Assassin's Creed III* begins with a Bond-like prologue so extended you'd be forgiven for forgetting the rest of the game is coming. Then it switches to a far less compelling protagonist, and relegates its ship combat to a single corner of the map.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

A breath of fresh sea air, *Black Flag* took the constituent parts of *Assassin's Creed III* and rearranged them into a much more freeform package. The inherent pleasure of embodying a golden-age pirate meant you didn't have to care about Pieces Of Eden to get onboard.

ASSASSIN'S CREED ROGUE

Playing as a Templar – one of the eternal enemies of the Assassins – was the unique promise of *Rogue*. Which is just as well, because otherwise it was a retread of *Black Flag*'s core mechanics and *Assassin's Creed III*'s New York setting. Eminently skippable.

reasons was also this 'next-gen promise' of moving from traditional platformers that require precision of inputs and rather going to the openness of open worlds," Jean says. "Where the second-to-second navigation is maybe not the core challenge."

While players were wooed by the promise of parkour and the crowds that flooded the alleyways of Acre, they weren't completely convinced by *Assassin's Creed*'s muddled experimentalism. In fact, there's a very good chance the series would have withered on the vine, long before it inspired a 2018 limited-edition wine collection. "I think this original push helped the franchise stand out at the time," Jean says. "But its evolution toward some more standard controls or game structure was necessary to allow *Assassin's Creed* to become the mainstream phenomenon it is now."

Jean joined the series as a designer on *Assassin's Creed II* – for which Ubisoft Montreal took a hard look at feedback from critics and fans. An expanded team cut the long monologues and wrote snappier cutscenes. They pockmarked Renaissance Italy with secret locations and let players swim in the canals of Venice. "We weren't shy to move away from the very repetitive structure of the sequences of the first game," Jean says.

After acknowledging that missions could better exploit the strengths of the assassin fantasy, the team identified three core pillars: parkour, fighting and stealth. "From allies, to enemies, to side missions, the entire game was all designed to make these three pillars shine," Jean says. The team filled its urban spaces with tempting routes up to the rooftops. "It was all about making parkour the most obvious way to navigate the world," Jean says. "The height of the cities was also something that was looked at to make sure that the climbing phase was not too tedious."

Lastly and importantly, Ubisoft Montreal made a conscious effort to instil their new characters with more personality. Danny Wallace joined the cast as a snarky handler and historian, ad-libbing his way into everyone's

» [PC] The sequel isn't afraid to put you up against multiple enemies. You'll need to master combat quickly to succeed.

» [PC] Swimming around the waterways of Venice opens up new assassination opportunities for Ezio.

memory banks. And Roger Craig Smith became Ezio Auditore da Firenze, a swaggering young hothead who audiences quickly came to love.

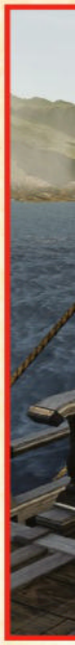
"I don't remember the phone call when I got the part, because I very likely wouldn't have known what it was that I got," Roger Craig Smith says. "It wouldn't have had anywhere near the same gravity that it does now, being a part of what the franchise has become."

Knowing that Ubisoft wanted him to play an Italian, Smith had studied the post-race interviews of Valentino Rossi, the MotoGP champion. "I went into this audition getting ready to do this very thick Italian accent, every consonant, every syllable," he says. "I think my ancestry is literally 96% Irish and British, so I'm about as far away as possible from Ezio in that regard."

In the event, Ubisoft was not too concerned about his ability to nail the accent – with the help of the dialect coach Ida Darvish, Roger would ultimately land on a blend of Italian and Spanish accents with an approachably English cadence. Instead, the developers wanted to ensure he could voice Ezio in three different age ranges: from the carefree and spoiled arrogance of his youth, through the revenge-driven anger of adulthood, to the cooler reflections of an older man dedicated to the Creed. "It became so challenging in the best possible ways," we're told. "Something I could really chew on from a performance standpoint, as opposed to some videogame work at that time, which was just: punch, kick, jump, scream."

The focus of that audition is instructive: it tells us why Ezio connected so powerfully with his audience. Players took charge of the assassin in the first, frightening moments after his birth – heeding his father's command to kick his legs, waggle his arms, and enter the world rather than recede from it. "You are an Auditore. You are a fighter. So fight!" Then, across the span of *Assassin's Creed II* and its direct sequels, players steered Ezio's life story. They ushered a flawed man through terrible losses, triumphs against corrupt powers, and a final commitment to something greater than himself.

» [PC] Early *Assassin's Creed* combat typically focussed on dodging, grabbing, pushing and finding openings.



"What was special about Ezio is that he felt like a very human protagonist," says Paul Fu, who joined the series to work on *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. "He had a life that wasn't just about the main plot of the game – he had a life outside of it. What really sold me, narratively speaking, was when he was parkouring with his mate across the rooftops in the opening tutorial, and when he climbed the building to look for his girlfriend. That was just beautiful. It felt to me like the fusion of design and narrative existed so well in that space, and the fantasy of that was just amazing."

Ezio's popularity ended up shifting the centre of gravity for the series as a whole. Initially, *Assassin's Creed* had been planned as a trilogy – ending with the collapse of the evil Abstergo at the hands of modern-day protagonist Desmond Miles, who by that time would have absorbed the knowledge and skills of his ancestors, Ezio among them. Original creative director Patrice Désilets had even intended that Desmond and Lucy – the genetic memory researcher played by *Frozen*'s Kristen Bell – would blast off in a spaceship to begin a new civilisation as Adam and Eve.

Instead, the series stuck with Ezio for two more entries: *Brotherhood* and *Revelations*. "When we designed *Assassin's Creed II*, Ezio's story arc was roughly from his birth to him becoming the mentor," Jean says. "This was meant to be parallel with Desmond's story, learning the techniques of the assassins via the bleeding effect. In practice this was way too ambitious to deliver properly in one game developed in two years. But these original ideas allowed us to develop his story through the next two games."

Over the course of Ezio's adventures, Ubisoft figured out the series' relationship with real-world history. In charmingly daft fashion, Ezio rubbed shoulders with Machiavelli, and relied on Leonardo Da Vinci for experimental weapons. Yet the games stayed largely faithful to the personalities and lives of these famous figures from the past.

"The systematic use of historians, pre-production on-site visits, and a clear position regarding history really started with *Assassin's Creed II*," Jean says. Ubisoft developed a '30-second rule' regarding its treatment of the

» [PC] *Assassin's Creed III* featured large tracts of countryside that transformed the feel of the series.

truth. If a historical fact could be found within half a minute of Googling, then the developers would stick to it. If not, then they would happily bend the details in the name of entertainment.

"We could play with things that would require more in-depth research," Jean says. "For instance, the exact agenda of Leonardo Da Vinci during the years of our game. The overall approach to history was never a rigid law, and the way it was applied changed from one project to another depending on the level of info available. It's more of a loose guideline used to ground the story while keeping the interactions feeling endearingly silly and human."

Paul says that Ubisoft's developers have always approached *Assassin's Creed* with as much authenticity as they could. "But at the same time, gameplay is king. So we would sometimes sacrifice history because, for example, a ship would take five or six minutes to turn. We can't possibly have that in a videogame, so it's six to nine seconds."

During the same period, Ubisoft became known for the scale and architectural beauty of its open-world cities, which were produced at an extraordinary pace. Ezio travelled from Florence to Venice; to Monteriggioni, San Gimignano and Forlì; and then in two sequels across sprawling depictions of Rome and Constantinople. "The games are not developed one after another," Paul points out. "They are always cascaded so that we can work in tandem."

To make this process possible, Ubisoft nurtured multiple *Assassin's Creed* teams across the various countries and continents the publisher called home – a model that many AAA developers have followed since. "At first we made sure to keep the creative and production control in Montreal, where the experience was, but giving mandates to other Ubisoft studios in order to make them grow," Jean says. "This is how, year after year, the basin of *AC* developers grew in terms of size but also experience, allowing us to send more and more ambitious mandates to remote studios."

Building a single game across multiple studios is "de facto, very difficult" Jean says. Out of an abundance of caution, Ubisoft put less experienced studios in charge of non-critical parts of the games – so that those

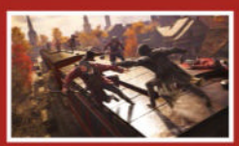
Stages Of Evolution: CREEDER'S DIGEST 2014-2016

BUGS, LONDON AND SIDE-SCROLLING QUESTS

ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY

Unity's atrocious reputation doesn't do justice to the game you can play now the bugs have been put to bed. Of all the cities in the series, Paris is the most alive with engrossing NPC activity. Its aesthetic prowess lends strength to the argument that graphics have plateaued since.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE



The series finally reached Lahn-dahn, and embraced every cockney cliché of the industrial era: Dickensian urchins, Jack The Ripper and gang warfare. You played as two twins, Jacob and Evie Frye, with differing skillsets. But by now sales were diminishing: a harder reboot was required.

ASSASSIN'S CREED CHRONICLES

With the *Black Flag* team occupied with work on *Origins*, Ubisoft expanded the *Assassin's Creed* universe with a tiny trilogy of side-scrolling stealth games from Portsmouth's Climax Studios. These evoked *Mark Of The Ninja*, and are worth digging up on the PS Vita.

"I THINK MY ANCESTRY IS LITERALLY 96% IRISH AND BRITISH, SO I'M ABOUT AS FAR AWAY AS POSSIBLE FROM EZIO IN THAT REGARD"

ROGER CRAIG SMITH

» [PC] Leonardo Da Vinci provided Ezio with compact and concealed weaponry befitting an intelligence agent.

» [PC] In multiplayer, competitors crept through the crowd to a target while evading their own hunter.

Stages Of Evolution:
CREEDER'S DIGEST
2017-2020
THE SERIES EVOLVES

ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

In the wake of *The Witcher 3*, Ubisoft's flagship series took on many aspects of the RPG genre – from intricate side quests to the occasional grind for experience points. By and large, this dramatic shift was a successful one, making Ancient Egypt the scene of *Assassin's Creed*'s revival.

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Notable for leaning into myth as well as history, *Odyssey* pitted players against not only Athenians and Spartans but Medusa, the Cyclops, the Sphinx and the Minotaur. It also adopted much of the player choice and consequence associated with the likes of *Fallout*.

ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Of such enormity is *Valhalla* that few have the spare time to finish it. Yet few regret starting it either, thanks to its bold narrative and striking depiction of Norway beneath the snow. It sold more copies during its first week on sale than any other *Assassin's Creed* game.

elements could be scaled down or ripped out if needed. "It never really happened though," Jean says, "and the integration of co-dev has grown consistently."

You can see the evolution of this approach across the *Assassin's Creed* games that followed Ezio's exit from the series. For *Assassin's Creed III*, Ubisoft Singapore developed a sophisticated sailing simulation that occupied an optional corner of the game's 18th-century Colonial America. "It was technically a huge achievement for the Singapore studio," Paul says. "It was with the help of Montreal as well. I remember it was technical director Georges Torres that helped us out with the first physics simulation and water simulation. There were many problems to solve, and together we solved it, internationally speaking."

Beyond the 12-hour time difference, there were cultural barriers the two teams had to overcome. "The way we present ourselves in meetings, and the way we sell our ideas, are all very different," Paul says. "But we found a very good way to work together, which is why I think Ubisoft Montreal and Singapore have always had a pretty close relationship. Long story short, I remember those days quite fondly."

Assassin's Creed III proved unpopular in some respects; its pacing took more dives than Ezio in a hay field. Protagonist Connor, meanwhile, couldn't match his predecessor for charisma. "The biggest problem the game had was that its development was run in parallel with the first major refactor of the Anvil engine," Jean says. "And, as all developers know, developing a game while the tech is in flux is not the ideal position to be in."

Assassin's Creed III was controversial, too, for killing off Desmond Miles – ending the overarching story first laid out by Désilets, albeit not in the way he'd planned. "In the early years of the franchise, things were moving really fast based on the last game's reception," Jean says. "*Assassin's Creed III* was always planned to be the end of Desmond's arc, but we managed to

» [PC] As Ezio became a mentor, focus shifted to leading a unit of assassins into battle.

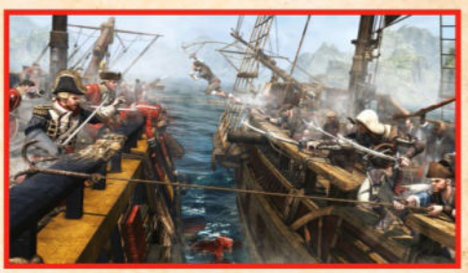
find a way to not 'end' the growing universe we were building with that game."

Though painful, the wisdom of a clean break became quickly evident. A series highpoint followed immediately in *Assassin's Creed III*'s wake. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* took the sailing simulation that Ubisoft now had full confidence in and made it the centrepiece of a piratical fantasy. "One of the first key decisions was to reuse everything we could," Jean says. The animal hunting and tree-hopping of Colonial America was repurposed in a new format that allowed players to explore the islands of the West Indies in freeform fashion, whether at sea or on land. "We had a lot of teething difficulties trying to move from focussed naval missions to a seamless naval experience," Paul says. Some compromises were necessary – like the loading screens that separated the wider world from cities like Havana and Kingston, due to memory limitations of the time.

Other victories yielded spectacular results, however. In *Assassin's Creed III*, boarding a ship triggered a cutscene. "But in *Assassin's Creed IV*, it was Jean's vision to make sure that the game was as seamless as possible," Paul says. "Even during the E3 demo, boarding wasn't completely seamless yet. They finally managed to make boarding seamless in the later months of production, which like many things in game development, is a miracle by itself."

> "PEOPLE REALLY LIKED THE PIRATE FANTASY AND THE CHARACTERS, BLACKBEARD ESPECIALLY"
> PAUL FU

At the wheel was Edward Kenway, a ship's captain freed from the heavy responsibilities of the protagonists who came before him. Though not ▶



» [PC] *Black Flag*'s E3 demo was spectacular, but wouldn't look as seamless as the final game.

» [PC] Edward Kenway explored the ocean floor in *Black Flag* via a diving bell.

» [PC] The often forgotten handheld spin-off *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* was directed by X-COM's Julian Gollop. It eventually received an HD rerelease.

» [PC] By its Colonial American era, the series had begun exploring the perspective of the Templars.

unburdened by guilt. "I remember being taken away by the first flashback that Edward had with his wife, Caroline," Paul says. "He was telling her, 'I'm going to provide for you, don't worry, I'm going to be gone a year, I reckon, maybe two.'" The game then skips forward three or four years, with Edward swashbuckling in the Caribbean, no end to his journey in sight. "So he didn't really fulfil his promise, and right from the onset of the game I was already heartbroken," Paul says. "A part of me already fell in love with Edward at that point."

Paul notes that longtime series fans had some reservations about a protagonist who, for much of the game's runtime, cared little for the 'Creed' of the title. "People really liked the pirate fantasy and the characters, Blackbeard especially," he says. "I also remember what they didn't like early on was that Edward didn't really feel like an assassin. But I think people quickly came around in the next few years, and soon enough it became a classic. I remember being really proud of the Montreal team for having the foresight to make an anti-hero."

You could argue that *Assassin's Creed* failed to find its feet on dry land afterwards. When the series next returned to a bustling *Brotherhood*-style metropolis, with 2014's *Unity*, critics were lukewarm at best and scathing at worst. Unsightly bugs plagued the game's launch. In particular a 'no-face' glitch

» [PC] *Unity* introduced co-op to the series, for what turned out to be the last time.

» [PC] *Assassin's Creed Shadows* is the most recent game in the series and transports the action to Feudal Japan.

– which saw the eyeballs and teeth of NPCs suspended disconcertingly in midair – became emblematic of *Unity*'s perceived failings.

"Sadly, *Unity*'s launch was a huge challenge because of several reasons," Jean says. "Like *Assassin's Creed III* with AnvilNext, *Unity*'s development was impacted by the incredible new tech allowing for 1:1 scale, interiors, massive crowds, a brand-new parkour system and an integrated multiplayer component. Pushing content and tech at the same time is always very demanding, and this opus maybe pushed too many things at once."

Calling *Unity* an 'opus' might sound like revisionist history to those who dismissed the game at release, but Jean is onto something. The worst of *Unity*'s bugs were quickly fixed, leaving behind a rendering of revolution-era Paris that remains breathtaking in its verisimilitude and verticality. Intimidatingly dense and tricky to master, *Unity* is nonetheless a marvellous stealth game that incorporates both dark corners and hiding in plain sight – folding in lessons from not only *Assassin's Creed* but *Splinter Cell*.

"*Unity*'s team decided that the key component would be Paris, one city only," Jean says. "Hence all decisions were made in order to make the setting shine and make sure players would experience the French Revolution like never before. This is why all mechanics and systems were more dense and focussed, potentially giving this feeling of asking a lot of players. Maybe we could have done better in terms of progressive introduction but overall I don't think the experience was too complicated."

In Jean's estimation, *Unity* is "one of the most underestimated games in the series". Perhaps that diminished public opinion contributed to the need for a reset. A few years later, the *Black Flag* team expanded its open-world formula with *Origins*, a *Witcher*-adjacent RPG that changed expectations for what an *Assassin's Creed* game looked like. In fact, the series still roughly adheres to the shape of *Origins* today; city-focussed entries with a sideline in social stealth are now the exception, not the norm. But the astonishing output of Ubisoft during that early period of *Assassin's Creed* means there is no shortage of games to play in that original formula; a veritable Library Of Alexandria just waiting for players who discovered the series in later iterations.

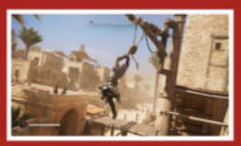
"I'm really proud about the way all teams took on the challenges to remain relevant and keep pushing to bring *Assassin's Creed* higher in terms of ambition and quality," Jean says. "From the sometimes rough experiment of the first *Assassin's Creed* to the ultra-dense London of *Syndicate* we managed, in less than ten years, to demonstrate that history can be mainstream, to develop a universe that keeps growing and to mobilise an ever-growing community of fans. I think that we can all be proud of this commitment and hard work."

> **"I'M REALLY PROUD ABOUT THE WAY ALL TEAMS TOOK ON THE CHALLENGES TO REMAIN RELEVANT AND KEEP PUSHING TO BRING ASSASSIN'S CREED HIGHER IN TERMS OF AMBITION AND QUALITY"**
> JEAN GUESDON

Stages Of Evolution: CREEDER'S DIGEST 2023-2026

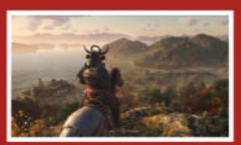
THE LATEST ADVENTURES

ASSASSIN'S CREED MIRAGE



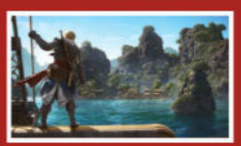
A curious and nostalgic exercise to resuscitate the formula of Noughties *Assassin's Creed*. *Mirage* focusses on stealth, parkour and assassinations – roughly the same pillars that first brought the series to fame. Baghdad has plenty more pillars besides.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS



Fans had long been calling for the series to head to feudal Japan. Ubisoft finally relented with a 16th-century rendition of the Sengoku period, where players shredded lit lanterns with shurikens, and crept over 'nightingale' floors designed to squeak when crossed.

ASSASSIN'S CREED BLACK FLAG RESYNCED



The series enters its remake era with a faithful return to the Carribean map that Edward Kenway bestrode a decade before. Thanks to more powerful consoles, Ubisoft has been able to dispose of the last of the loading screens that broke up an otherwise seamless open-world experience.

THE MAKING OF ASSASSIN'S CREED BLACK FLAG RESYNCED

FEW ASSASSIN'S CREED GAMES ARE AS BELOVED AS BLACK FLAG, WHICH WEAVED PIRACY INTO THE POPULAR SERIES AND INTRODUCED GAMERS TO EDWARD KENWAY. WITH A MODERN REMAKE NOW UPON US, WE SPOKE TO CO-DIRECTOR PAUL FU TO FIND OUT WHY IT IS THE PERFECT TIME TO REVISIT THE CLASSIC GAME

WORDS BY DARRAN JONES

■ Paul Fu worked on the original *Black Flag* as a game and level designer and associate lead and is now co-director of *Black Flag Resynced.*

For many, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* is one of the best games in Ubisoft's popular series. It not only iterated on the mechanics of the earlier games, but also added plenty of fresh ideas and introduced players to a new hero, Edward Kenway. With a new remake of the game due shortly, we spoke to Paul Fu, who was not only involved with the original *Black Flag*, but is now co-director on the new game.

So Paul, what made you decide it was time to update *Black Flag*?
Personally, Edward has always been a very special assassin. He's roguish, greedy but also a deeply rooted father and husband. There was a period of time a few years ago when we saw fans expressing their fondness for Edward, as a father – and assassin – online. It made us wonder if we should revisit the idea of remaking the Caribbean. Also, *Black Flag* was an important and extremely memorable project for the Singapore studio. As we have been building up naval and content expertise for a while, it felt natural for us to bring back the fantasy.

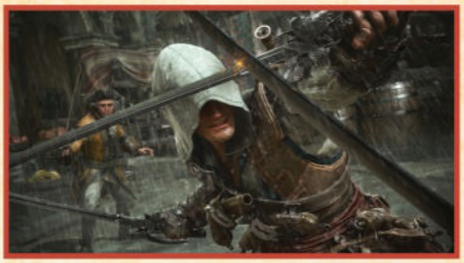
How does it feel returning to a game you previously worked on and was there a need to fix things that had bothered you the first time around?
It's a great privilege to be working on *Black Flag* again. I wouldn't use the word 'fix'. I have too much reverence for *Black Flag* to say that! We loved the lore of Kenway and the Caribbean, and we sought to expand both.

How long has the new team been working on *Resynced* and what's the biggest challenge you've faced from a technical point of view?
We've been working on it for more than three years now. One of the biggest challenges was to bring back the complex scripted sequences from the original. *Black Flag*'s an old-school *Assassin's Creed*. Tightly choreographed scripted events such as walk-and-talks, collapsing platforms and wanton destruction was part of the classic *AC* formula. Needing to recreate (and expand on) these sequences mean new tools – not just for ground gameplay, but for naval and underwater as well. We took that challenge going in, and we're glad we did.

The combat feels a lot more fluid when compared to the original game. Is this something you generally wanted to improve?
Combat in the original was great, but naval received more attention back in the day. We wanted to make sure that ground gameplay was strong in *Resynced*, so we invested a lot to build the combat system from the ground up, but keep its dramatic parry-based core. It was

» [PC] It wouldn't be an *Assassin's Creed* game without an exhilarating bit of parkour.

» [PC] *Black Flag Resynced* has been made with the AnvilNext engine and it looks absolutely stunning throughout Edward's journey.



» [PC] Combat has been significantly updated over the original game, but Edward remains a king of the parry.

also a big challenge for the Singapore studio to push for a more action-oriented (as opposed to DPS-driven) combat system. We had a lot of help from the Quebec and Barcelona studios, which we are very thankful for.

For those that haven't played it, what can you tell us about the new quality-of-life features in *Resynced*?

There are many, many quality-of-life features. Cities are now completely seamless with no loading. Edward can dive anywhere. We've added a crouch button that provides a stealth advantage. Critical tools such as smoke bomb, heal and whistle are easily accessible on the d-pad, and you can now put the hood on and off at will. The list goes on!

Why choose to add new characters and story developments this time around and were they ever considered for the original game?

There was a whole page of ideas by the team on the original game, and one of the ideas was officer questlines. It's been something that I've wanted since *Assassin's Creed III*, and I'm glad they've now made it into *Black Flag Resynced*. After the launch of *Black Flag*, we felt there were a few narrative threads that could be expanded upon too. We knew that fans would want new content for a remake, so we took to the drawing board early to provide new content for returning fans.

What improvements have you made to the ship battles in this version?

Fundamentally, we wanted the naval core to remain the same as *Black Flag*. Keeping the same quadrant-based aiming identity authentic was very important to us. The diagonal no-aim spots on the Jackdaw were deliberate, to force players to rotate and commit to a specific side, a signature of *Black Flag*'s naval combat. We kept that, and polished it. But we also wanted to expand on the core. In *Resynced*, players can expect secondary fire weapons (eg Heated Shots), a mechanic that allows you to switch the active weapon on each side of the ship. Primary fire and secondary fire modes aim and work differently, with different ranges. This elevates naval combat, without changing the core.

Why do you think *Black Flag* remains one of the best-loved games in the series?

Personally, I think it's because of Edward Kenway's story. Darby (McDevitt, original lead writer) did a fantastic job shaping and writing the narrative around history. Edward's a deeply human character. He's just a fellow that wants to prove himself to his family, something we can all relate to. The story of *Black Flag*'s the reason why it's one of the best-loved games in the series.

HANDS-ON HO!

OUR EARLY PLAY WITH BLACK FLAG RESYNCED

We were lucky enough to play a couple of hours of *Black Flag Resynced* at a recent press event, which not only let us experience new sections of the game, but also let us go hands-on with some of the new features.

The biggest change to the original *Black Flag* is just how fluid the combat now is. There's a lovely ebb and flow to battles but it's still possible to pull off key parries and finish off foes with a flourish. Ship combat is also a lot more expansive now and while we occasionally struggled to move our ship around, it still feels dramatically improved over the original sea battles. We won't say too much about the new plot points and character interactions we had, other than it's nice to see one of our favourite characters from the series being given a few more layers to his personality. Hopefully a review will follow shortly.

» [PC] The boat sections of *Black Flag* were always fun and now they've been improved for even more intense sea battles.

» [PC] Edward has become a much more qualified swimmer than in the first game and can now dive anywhere.

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IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** AMSTAR / CENTURI / TAITO
- **DEVELOPER:** UNKNOWN
- **PLATFORM:** ARCADE, ATARI 2600
- **RELEASED:** 1980
- **GENRE:** SHOOT-'EM-UP

PHOENIX

DESPITE NUMEROUS GROUND-BREAKING INNOVATIONS, PHOENIX IS RARELY MENTIONED IN THE SAME BREATH AS ITS LEGENDARY ARCADE PEERS. RETRO GAMER LOOKS BACK AT THE SHOOT-'EM-UP THAT CEMENTED THE CONCEPT OF THE BOSS FIGHT AND BECAME A MASSIVE HIT FOR ITS US DISTRIBUTOR

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

In the wake of the incredible success of arcade games *Space Invaders* and *Galaxian*, manufacturers inevitably released a vast range of similar fixed space shoot-'em-ups. You can't blame them; the genre was proving highly attractive to arcade fans, the machines hoovering up coins worldwide. Yet times were moving fast, and the root shooting mechanics were no longer enough. Released into arcades from late winter 1980 onwards, *Phoenix* took the basic gameplay of those aforementioned classics and introduced several fresh elements. But first, the plot, which often varies according to the source. The Atari 2600 manual (the only official home conversion) recounts an evocative story of an ancient bird of great beauty, constantly resurrected, until radiation warps it into a terrifying bird of prey.

Supported by its kin, the near-invincible birds torment humankind, allying themselves with an alien species that is determined to drain the Earth of all of its resources. Other sources cite the player spacecraft itself as the Phoenix, facing off against a series of aggressive Warhawks. Meanwhile, the original arcade game manual, published in the US by Centuri, eschews any such dramatics, boasting of waves of attacking Phoenixes and a spaceship loaded with deadly rockets.

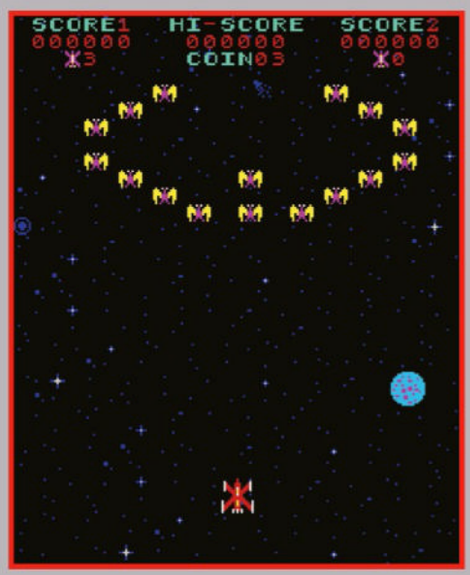
> "TIMES WERE MOVING FAST, AND THE ROOT SHOOTING MECHANICS WERE NO LONGER ENOUGH"

Whatever story you believe, the game plays the same, and while *Phoenix* repeats its five stages ad infinitum, each is structured differently, building up to a final climactic battle. The player spaceship glides along a horizontal plane at the bottom of the screen. Its central body fires

» [Arcade] Stages three and four begin with these formation eggs.

» [Arcade] Preparing to take on the Superfortress in stage five.

» [Arcade] Shooting a large Phoenix causes it to explode.



» [Arcade] The battle begins.

upwards, while its two wings pulse as it moves left and right. The starfield continuously scrolls in the background, and the spacecraft's shot power varies, able to unleash two rapid-fire shots on the second and fifth screens.

In the first stage, 16 small birds hover in the space field above the player. Planets and comets decorate the backdrop before these nippy Phoenixes take turns in plunging towards the lone spacecraft, dropping bombs or engaging in devastating suicide runs. The second stage is similar, only now the player's craft can fire two shots at a time, a useful power-up to counter the more aggressive birds. Stage three introduces a significant change. Firstly, eight eggs appear, zig-zagging across the screen. A sharp-shooting player can take some of these out before they hatch into large blue Phoenix birds, again dive-bombing down the screen at the player. Accuracy is key here: clipping a Phoenix wing is a largely symbolic achievement as these powerful creatures possess the

» [Arcade] This version of *Phoenix* is marketed by Amstar, appropriately based in Phoenix, Arizona.

THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE

WE LOOK AT PHOENIX'S LONE – OFFICIAL – HOME PORT, ON THE ATARI 2600

Appearing over two years after the arcade game first debuted, the Atari 2600 port of *Phoenix* drew high praise, despite going head-to-head with Imagic's similar game, *Demon Attack*. Developed by John Mracek and Michael Feinstein at General Computer Corporation, it's one of the console's finest arcade conversions, sweetly smooth and technically brilliant. While some aspects of the original are inevitably missing – there are no background details at all, or enemy birds on the final stage – squeezing the then-complex arcade game into the Atari 2600 remains an impressive feat. Of particular note is that final boss fight, which is just as frantic and compelling as it should be, and the remarkable way the *Phoenix* wings grow back when shot. It was enough to put *Phoenix* into **Retro Gamer**'s Top 25 Atari 2600 games back in 2008.

DEVELOPER Q+A

RETRO GAMER CATCHES UP WITH ERSTWHILE ATARI 2600 DEVELOPER, JOHN MRACEK

How did you come to work on the Atari 2600 version of *Phoenix*, John?
It was a summer job, actually. I was between junior and senior years at MIT when I got an offer to work on videogames at a place called GCC, General Computer Corporation. Who could turn that down? So, I went there and worked on *Phoenix* with my partner, Mike Feinstein. I was 20.

Were you familiar with the arcade game?
I wouldn't say I was an expert, but I was aware of *Phoenix*. And, of course, all the games we did home versions of were in the office, so we could match exactly what the arcade game did. We made it under contract to Atari from our offices in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

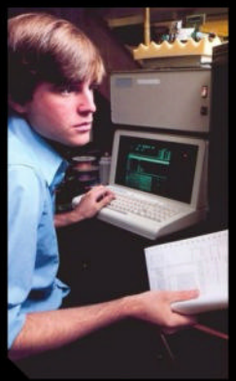
What was it like adapting the colourful and fast arcade game to the Atari 2600?
If you look at the early adaptations to the Atari, they were pretty bad. It had very limited system capabilities, with 128 bytes of memory and an actual program space of 8K. Arcade machines had much beefier processors and more memory, so it was definitely a challenge. But we took it to another level because we were able to push the machine further.

But you had to make some sacrifices?
Yeah. The real challenge was the mothership stage, in which you have all these birds attacking you at the same time. That was not doable on the Atari, so you had the boss on its own; there was no way to have all the activity of the birds on top of that. That's where we had to make a compromise on the gameplay.

It's still a great adaptation. You must have been pleased with how it turned out?
We were very proud. We faithfully recreated the act of shooting the wings off the birds, and that was a challenge, too. We had to mimic all those movements because we had no spec for it – we just watched and watched the game and came up with a good algorithm to calculate where the birds should be at a given time, ran it, then tweaked and tweaked it.

What was it like working at GCC?
It was fun – it was a bunch of kids right out of college, and we didn't have any preconceived notions about what was doable or not. We just wanted to find ways to make things work, and working on *Phoenix* reinforced that positive attitude. That came from the founders, particularly Doug McRae, whose creativity and approach – that nothing was impossible – infused me with the belief that you can solve most problems.

Our thanks to John for his time.



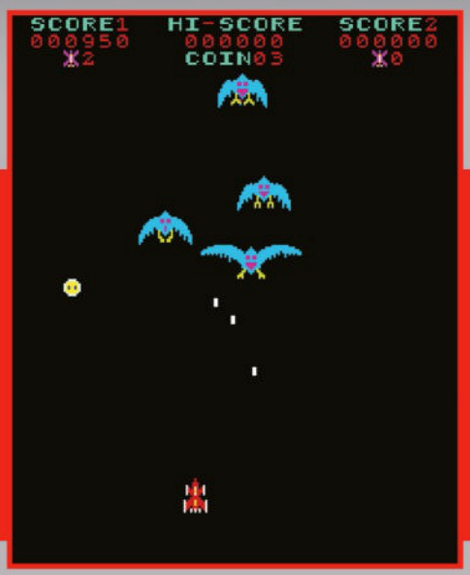
» Today, John is still trying to use his brain doing business development for an AI infra software company. Beyond that, he spends his time at softball tournaments with his daughter, as well as mountain biking and rock climbing.

» [Arcade] Like many birds, the Phoenix fly in formation.

"AS IS COMMON WITH ARCADE GAMES, PHOENIX IS NO GENTLE SPACE WALK"

» [Arcade] Phoenixes prepare to swoop down and attack the player.

» [Arcade] The Superfortress is far from defenceless.



» [Arcade] Freshly hatched, the Phoenixes of stage three attack.

» [Arcade] *Phoenix* has a scoring system based on the height and behaviour of the enemy.

» [Arcade] Beat the Superfortress and the game loops, only harder, faster and meaner.

ability to regenerate almost instantly, the wing growing back before your eyes. The only shot that counts is one to their heart. A second wave of large Phoenixes (now pink in colour) appears next, before that decisive battle against the alien mothership behind all this mayhem.

Called a Spacefortress in the Centuri arcade manual, the arrival of *Phoenix*'s stage five was a substantial moment in videogame history. Here was a singular enemy, visible, yet protected within an immense starship, descending on the player as its cohorts provided cover. Occupying almost the entire width of the game screen, the bottom of the fortress is a yellow shootable barrier, deepest below the vulnerable boss. Chip away at this (while dodging the birds, plus missiles dropped from the mothership), and you'll reach the rotating barricade. When you've punched a sizeable enough hole in this, it takes just one shot to destroy the octopoid alien.

As is common with arcade games, *Phoenix* is no gentle space walk. Fortunately, your spacecraft has a secret weapon against the mass of killer avians. Activating the player's shield cloaks their ship in a shroud of energy, making it able to repel not only enemy missiles, but the enemies themselves. Thus, you can turn defence into attack, eliminating any birds that get too close. Sadly, the spaceship cannot move while shielded, although it can still fire. After a few seconds, the force field depletes and requires a short recharge period. Wise and tactical use of the shield is vital if you're to survive long against the incessant flock of Phoenix attacks, especially given the smaller enemies' habit of waiting and ambushing the player at the base of the screen.

Phoenix has a complex system for scoring, and with the game granting bonus ships at two particular scores (depending on dip switch settings), it's a good idea to work out which enemies to hit and when. The smaller birds in the first two waves score between 20 and 80 points, although snagging them as they return upscreen following a dive-bomb run increases this to 200. These figures are adjusted based on the enemy's screen position, and the same applies to the Superfortress: hanging back

PHOENIX FROM THE FLAMES

HOW TO BEST THOSE BELLICOSE BIRDS

SHIELD ME

■ The player's ship has a powerful defensive measure – its shield. Activating this encompasses the craft in a glowing screen that protects it from both enemies and their missiles. But that's not all. Should any Phoenix fly into it, they're destroyed, making it a useful offensive weapon, too.

RISE AGAIN

■ Shooting a Phoenix's wings may seem like an easy hit, but it's rarely the answer to completing a wave. As their name suggests, these flying space birds are adept at bouncing back from such inconveniences, re-growing their wings within a short time. Shoot their bodies to be sure they stay down.

DON'T DAWDLE

■ All varieties of the Phoenix take umbrage at your ineffectiveness. Waste too many shots or spend too much time dodging, and they'll become faster and meaner, making your life considerably trickier. Try to take out as many as you can in the initial stages.

THIN THE HERD

■ The final wave contains both the well-protected top boss and its legion of crack troops. You'll need to clear some of the zooming pests, but try to leave one or two still in the game. Kill them, and they'll all regenerate, leaving you with a much bigger task on your hands.

» [Arcade] Taking out enemies in stage four.

» [Arcade] Letting loose multiple shots in stage two.

» [Arcade] The Superfortress of stage five slowly descends on the player.

and eliminating it when it's closer to the player spacecraft yields a higher bonus. Risky, but worth it. For the ultimate challenge, elite players can clip a Phoenix's wings before shooting the remaining core before they grow back.

Given its feathered theme, it's apt that *Phoenix* begins with a trilling tune, based on the famous guitar piece, *Spanish Romance*, followed by Beethoven's *Für Elise* at the successful conclusion of stage five. With the original developer unknown and most likely based in Japan, US manufacturers Amstar (fittingly based in Phoenix, Arizona) and Centuri were responsible for the game's distribution in American arcades, although Amstar is often credited as the game's developer as well (see the Who Made Phoenix? panel). Taito handled the Japanese and European versions, and as such, a variety of cabinets exist, each featuring the titular, slightly maniacal-looking birds, in both stand-up and cocktail forms. The uprights feature four buttons – left, right, fire and shield – while the cocktail versions use a small joystick for movement.

"GIVEN THE UBIQUITY OF BOSS FIGHTS TODAY, IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THE IMPACT PHOENIX HAD BACK IN 1981"

While there was no apparent direct sequel to *Phoenix*, several arcade games could lay claim to the 'spiritual sequel' moniker, most notably Tehkan's *Pleiads*, also licensed by Centuri in the US. Here, flying creatures assail the player, and there's a boss mothership that looks much like a miniature version of the Superfortress from *Phoenix*. The template of varying levels became popular, too, with games such as Midway's *Gorf* copying the style, while adding their own differing gameplay. Furthermore, several arcade hacks and bootlegs played 'tribute' to the shoot-'em-up, most of them unsurprisingly originating in Italy.

Given the ubiquity of boss fights today, it's hard to believe the impact *Phoenix* had back in 1981. But imagine this: you've played *Space Invaders*' endless identical waves to death, battled *Galaxian* and more, and are busy dispatching deadly flying birds in the latest arcade game. You beat one stage, then another, and two more, and are, not unreasonably, expecting more of the same. Then, *Phoenix*'s Superfortress appears, its version of *Star Wars*' Death Star, supported by swirling fighters, protected by strong armour and slowly descending on the player's solitary fighter. It was, and still is, some sight. Arcade games had changed forever.

THE RISE OF THE PHOENIX CLONES

DEMON ATTACK

Written by ex-Atari employee Rob Fulop, the original Atari 2600 version of *Demon Attack* proved a big hit. But it wasn't until the Intellivision version appeared that the trouble started. Why? Because coder Gary Kato slipped in this final boss battle that led to *Phoenix*'s licensor, Atari, suing Imagic.

PHEENIX

A one-hit wonder from Megadodo Software, AKA Martin Ward, *Pheenix* crams the arcade thrills of *Phoenix* into just 16K. The enemies are more aggressive, and there are plentiful shots for the player from stage two onwards, although you can't shoot the bird wings off. A great little shoot-'em-up for the lesser Spectrum.

CONDOR ATTACK

Publisher Ultravision released just two Atari 2600 games – this and the risible *Karate* – and despite a bare-bones display, *Condor Attack* is a serviceable shoot-'em-up for anyone after some *Phoenix*-themed blasting. There's no sign of the boss level in *Condor Attack*, but the influence is clear.

FALCONS

This Apple II game is one of the earliest *Phoenix* clones, released in 1981 by Piccadilly Software. It's an unsubtle rip-off, replicating all the levels reasonably accurately, albeit with a hugely increased level of difficulty. Responsive controls help in that department, but it remains an extremely challenging shoot-'em-up.

» [Arcade] The Superfortress' primary shield is almost gone.

RETRO GAMER EXAMINES THE MOST PROMINENT UNOFFICIAL PORTS OF PHOENIX

EAGLE EMPIRE

An early game from the talented multiformat coder Steve Evans, *Eagle Empire* is an accurate clone of *Phoenix*, leading *Zzap!64*'s Julian Rignall to score it an impressive 84%. All five rounds are present, and there's plenty of colour on both the BBC Micro and Commodore 64 versions.

FIREBIRDS

Developed by veteran coder Graeme Devine, *Firebirds* is another cash-in on the *Phoenix*/*Demon Attack* format, and one that, for once, fails on most counts. Flickery graphics, poor collision detection and an inevitable lack of originality hamper this Softek release, although a later covertape update marginally improved matters.

MEGA PHOENIX

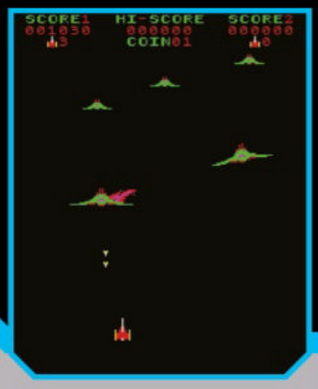
Less a clone and more a reimagining, *Mega Phoenix* introduces the new eponymous villain, power-ups and a massive player spacecraft. Published by Spanish software house Dinamic, it's a sleek and enjoyable update of the classic shoot-'em-up, with the 16-bit ports offering a fun simultaneous two-player mode.

THE MYSTERY DEV

WHO MADE PHOENIX?

As noted by Darran in issue 172 of **Retro Gamer**, the identity of Phoenix's developer is currently unknown. Certain sources, including Moby Games, cite it as Amstar Electronics, but since that name appears on the title screen of some versions, it seems more likely that it was an early US manufacturer of the machine, and another licensor. With the Japanese market seeing the first release late in 1980, it's also likely that *Phoenix* originated in Japan.

While researching this article, **Retro Gamer** noticed a similarity in *Pleiads* beyond its core gameplay, with the score and lives headers from both games appearing identical. Could it be that Tehkan, inspired by its earlier game, *Space Firebird* (licensed from Nintendo), created *Phoenix*? Or did it just copy the style, as, according to some, *Pleiads* was an actual sequel? Or was Tehkan another licensor, acquiring the game from a little-known Japanese company called Hiraoka? With more than 45 years having passed since the shoot-'em-up first appeared, we may never find out.



Fruity Frank

MR DON'T!

» AMSTRAD CPC » 1984 » STEVEN WALLIS

I'm not sure how I've managed to get to the ripe old age of 52 without knowing about *Fruity Frank*. I'd have absolutely lapped it up as a kid because it's essentially a clone of Universal's *Mr Do!* one of my favourite arcade games of all time.

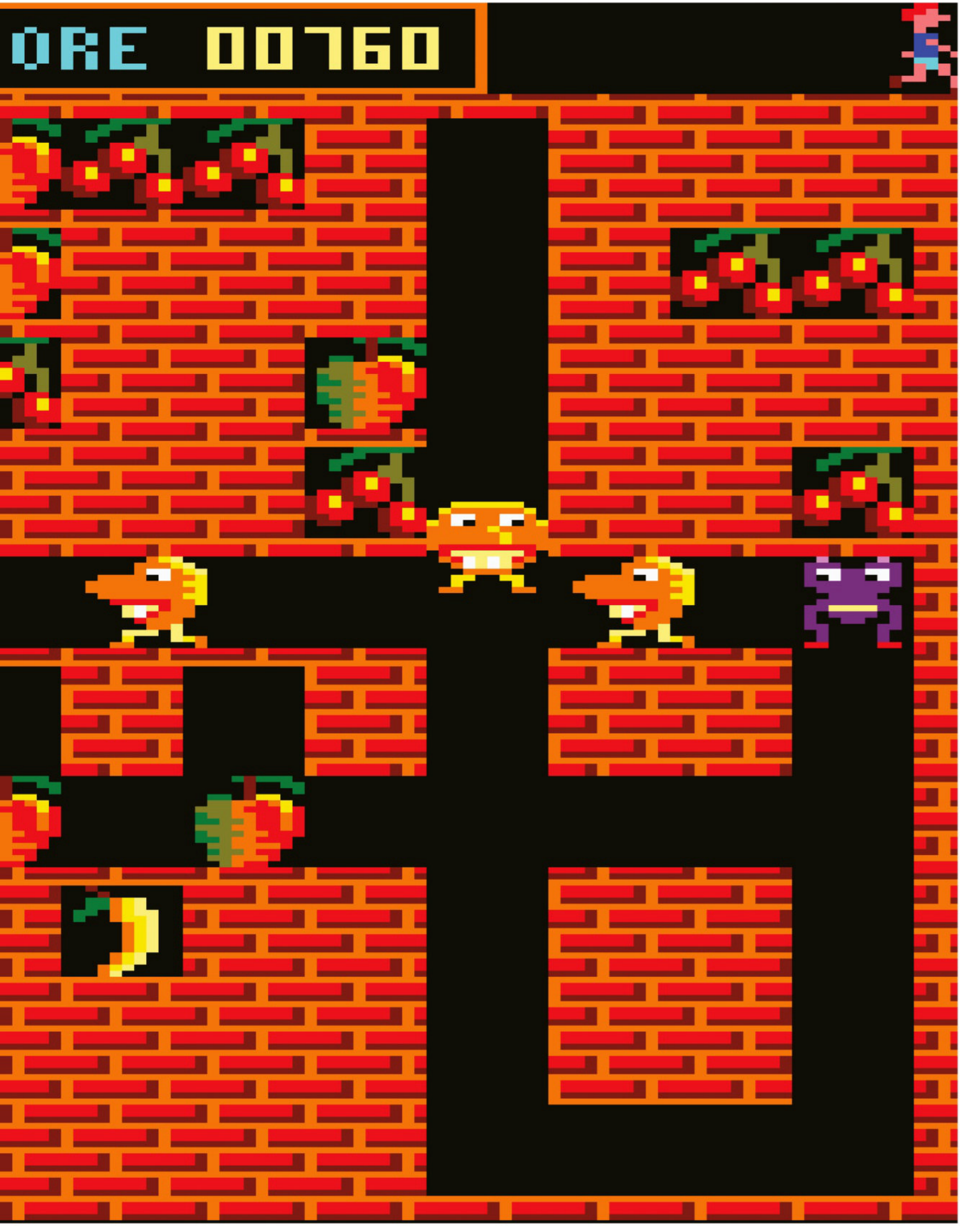
I've not done much fruit picking in my life, but it's never been as chaotic or dangerous as it is in this game. Numerous odd-looking monstrosities patrol the single-screen levels and while they can be clobbered by dropping apples on them, said apples can also crush you if you're not nimble enough to get out of the way.

As with Universal's game, *Fruity Frank* requires you to collect cherries to finish each stage, but there are additional fruits like pears and bananas to collect as well, which I didn't realise on my first few plays. Granted it adds some variety, but it also adds a wrinkle of difficulty that isn't really needed, as initially you're not sure whether to grab them or avoid them.

While I'm pretty sure that 1984 Darran would have been blown away by *Fruity Frank*, 2026 Darran is older, wiser and has played a lot more games. The biggest sin that *Fruity Frank* makes is that the levels change whenever you die. Now on the one hand, this adds some much-needed variety, but it also means that you can't form strategies like you can in Universal's game.

Another issue I have is with how the game looks. The first stage is fine with a green and black combination that's similar to Universal's game, but as you progress through the stages the colour choices become gaudier and gaudier and it gets harder to separate the fruits you need to pick up.

I'm glad I've experienced *Fruity Frank*, but it's certainly a game that gets by on nostalgia rather than by the strength of its mechanics. To me it feels like a good example of a designer copying a game from the arcade, but not really capturing what made that game so magical in the first place.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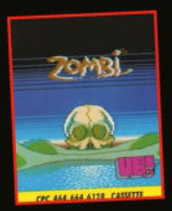
THE MAKING OF Zombi

UBISOFT IS KNOWN TODAY FOR ITS OPEN-WORLD GAMES AND BIG FRANCHISES SUCH AS ASSASSIN'S CREED AND FAR CRY, BUT ONCE UPON A TIME IT WAS ALL VERY DIFFERENT. THIS IS THE STORY BEHIND THE PUBLISHER'S VERY FIRST VIDEOGAME

WORDS BY GUY MIQUEL-ALBERT



IN THE KNOW

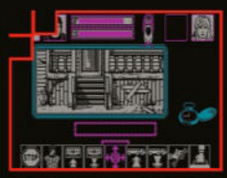
- **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT
- **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT
- **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1986
- **GENRE:** ACTION AND ADVENTURE

Ubisoft's very first in-house videogame is a genre of its own and not easy to define. Why and how was an unofficial adaptation of George Romero's *Dawn Of The Dead* film brought to life in 1986 in the Parisian suburbs?

Patrick Daher's first contact with computer science goes back to the end of the Seventies, when he saw a news report on TV showing a personal computer playing a small tune and displaying the related notes at the same time on the screen. "I realised it was possible to interact with what was happening on the computer screen in a complex way," he explains to us. After he had spent so much time programming on his step father's Apple II, he owned a ZX Spectrum on which he started programming small videogames in BASIC. A friend of his then paid him 500 French Francs to design the graphics of his Amstrad game. "I understood it was possible to make money out of this and a few months later I left high school to dedicate myself fully to designing videogames."

This Amstrad CPC 6128 game, *Warrior+*, an enhancement of the CPC 464 version, was published by Rainbow Production, actually owned by a shop located in boulevard Voltaire, where most computer science stores were concentrated in Paris. "Sylvie Hugonnier, staff member of this shop, Coconut Informatique, had been approached by the Guillemot Brothers, who wanted to start publishing videogames and were therefore looking for people and projects ready to work in this field," says Patrick. "I accepted to join Ubisoft and they introduced me to Yannick Cadin, who programmed *Zombi*, the company's very first game."

Yannick Cadin reckons that he joined Ubisoft's studio by chance, "I was just in the right place at the right moment," he tells us. "I was then 18 in 1985, preparing for my computer science and management bacalauréat degree, the equivalent of the United Kingdom's A levels,



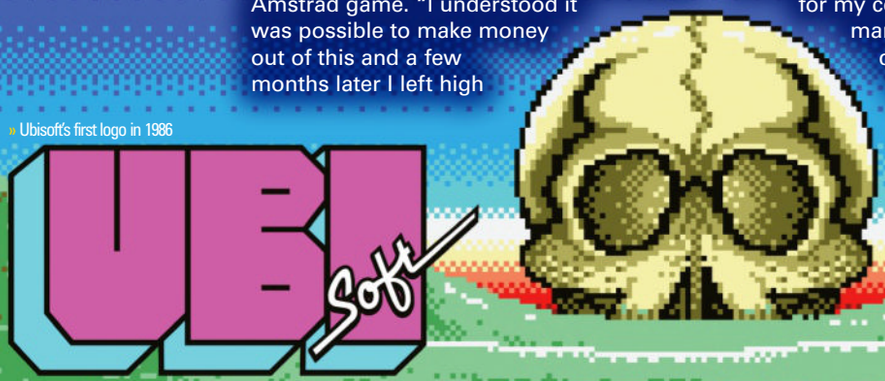
DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ASPHALT
PLATFORM: AMSTRAD CPC
RELEASED: 1987

NIGHT HUNTER
PLATFORM: VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1988

HURLEMENTS (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: DOS, AMSTRAD CPC
RELEASED: 1988

» Ubisoft's first logo in 1986



» [Amstrad CPC] The first place you'll need to rush in order to survive.

» [Amstrad CPC] Going too far from the mall leads you directly to an army of living dead.

» [Amstrad CPC] There's some Commodore product placement in the Amstrad version.

and a friend of mine took me to Coconut Informatique after class, where I discovered a whole videogame studio on the first floor. The second time I went to this store, a blonde, charming woman named Sylvie Hugonnier, put her hand on my shoulder and asked me if I would like to program the first game of a publishing company to be."

Seizing this opportunity, Yannick soon met Patrick, who had already designed his game system and user interface in school. Patrick, inspired by the text adventure games he had played, definitely wanted to improve on this system, by the use of icons to interact with a graphic environment. "I found these videogames a bit off-putting," he mentions. "The main difficulty consisted in finding the right syntax so that the computer would understand what you needed to do." He also thought about designing a game playable in real-time, since these icons offered the opportunity to interact faster, in a simpler way, "I wanted to increase the player's stress level and his commitment."

> "WHEN ZOMBI WAS LAUNCHED THEY HAD NO IDEA WHICH GENRE TO PICK AND WHICH LIST THEY COULD ADD IT TO"
> YANNICK CADIN

As a great fan of George Romero's *Night Of The Living Dead* series, Patrick's dream was to unofficially adapt the second film, *Dawn Of The Dead*, as a videogame. He asked Alexandre Bonan, one of his friends, to turn the film's story into an interactive media. "We did not encounter any problem with the film's publisher, since living-dead stories were a horror cinema niche at the time. I remember meeting George Romero in Canada in the late-Nineties and telling him about the game I co-created. He found it very amusing, not being too picky for this kind of thing. The Guillemot brothers knew the game was totally copied from the film's story but were not at all worried about it." Yannick adds, "Ubisoft wasn't concerned at all about author's rights at the time, and I can claim that most French videogames publishing companies weren't concerned much either. And considering the average age of the developers suggesting their projects to Ubisoft, I really doubt any author's rights' notions were familiar to them."

For four months, *Zombi*'s creators worked hard on their project, often in difficult and rough conditions, as Yannick remembers. "I would code on an Amstrad CPC 664 at home and on the CPC 6128 accessible in Ubisoft's office with the only software at my disposal, DAMS. Considering I had to cross all of Paris from the northern suburbs to the south east and that it took me two hours to get there and the same amount of time to come back, after a day spent coding at the office I ▶

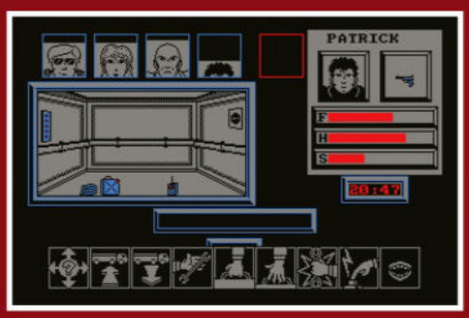
PATRICK DAHER

■ Patrick worked on *Zombi*'s original concept and graphics. Very fond of indie games nowadays, he would be interested in stepping into the videogame industry once again.

YANNICK CADIN

■ Yannick coded *Zombi*. He now dreams about creating a convivial place dedicated to the history of computer sciences, mildly inspired by Hard Rock Cafe.

» [Amstrad CPC] The Amstrad CPC's Mode 1 allows adding details to a scene, like dirt.



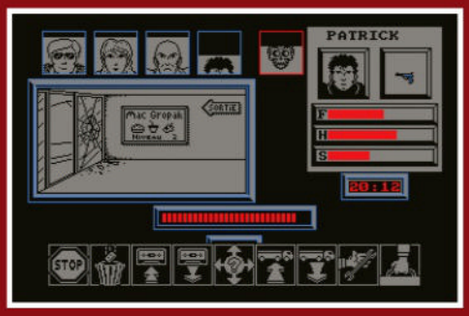
» [Amstrad CPC] The elevator is essential to store items and share them between characters.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

HOW UBISOFT STARTED OUT PRODUCING AND DEVELOPING VIDEOGAMES

The Guillemot brothers needed to find new thriving markets in order to develop their family business, initially dedicated to agriculture. Thus came the creation of Guillemot International, which distributed English games on French territory. Then, in 1986, Ubisoft was founded as a videogame publisher and developer. According to our interviewees the Guillemot brothers wanted to avoid people knowing they were behind Ubisoft as the company started. Yannick learned on the *Zombi* project that they created the Ubisoft structure as a decoy. "They wanted to own a publishing company in order to acquire the distribution deals of the foreign videogames publishers. Videogame development was just there to put up a front for the business."

Patrick even specifies that employees became paranoid about it, and that Yves Guillemot had to be hidden in a locker whenever someone came to visit the studio. Yannick also remembers one of his last visits to the Ubisoft office, "Yves Guillemot came and welcomed me. On the way to his office we passed by some hastily organised installation, a few computers and their peripherals placed on wooden boards. Yves explained the purpose of this set by declaring he was expecting important people to come by and asked me what I thought about our development space. I naively answered that it would look more realistic if the machines were connected to each other."



» [Amstrad CPC] Fast food won't kill you as quick as zombies do.

» [Amstrad CPC] Your primary objective is to find fuel for the helicopter in order to escape.

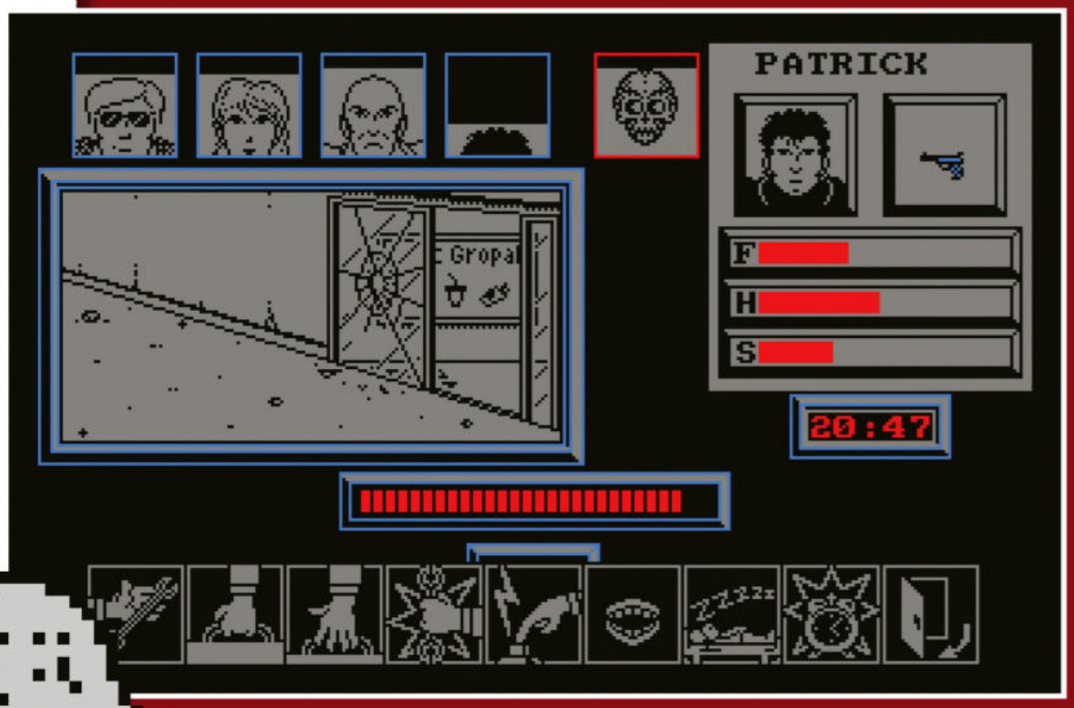
would consider sleeping on the thin, uncomfortable carpet. I would sometimes sleep on the entrance's couches, less hard than the concrete floor, but also very uncomfortable and not really helping me find sleep." Patrick specifies that Yannick, in the last weeks before Ubisoft's deadline, had to give a lot of himself coding. "On my previous projects with Rainbow Production we weren't given any deadlines, and working with a limited amount of time for Ubisoft prepared us for what was coming next."

> "I WANTED TO INCREASE THE PLAYER'S STRESS LEVEL AND HIS COMMITMENT"
> PATRICK DAHER

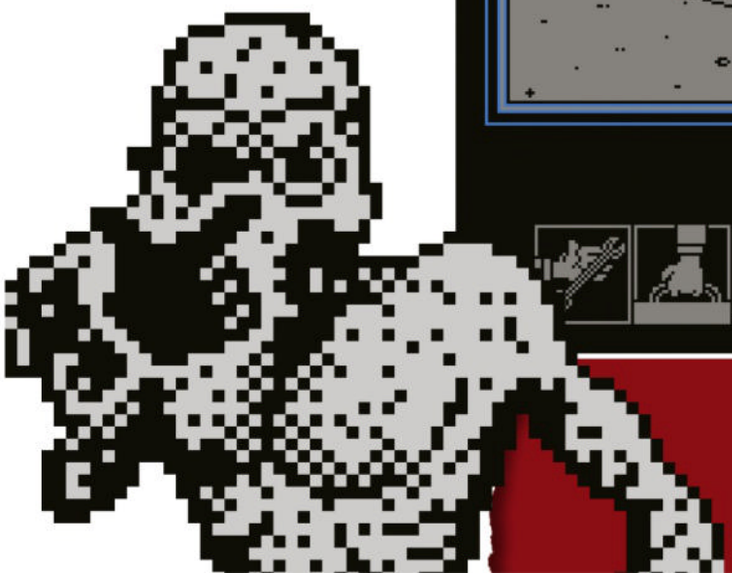
Coding *Zombi* taught Yannick a lot, all the more as Ubisoft's first game was also his first serious work as a developer. "At the time at least, I had a tendency to start from a global view and to define guidelines that I could progressively fine-tune. This made me code almost everything before running the first tests. On *Zombi*, I didn't need to conceptualise any of the level design since everything had already been decided before I joined the team. The mall map, drawn on a school notebook, had very likely been shared with me. From this map I could code a data structure representing the locations. In each location the data structure specified which other places you could access by moving towards one of the four cardinal points, and up or down. At each location information was provided, such as the number of active and killed zombies, the corpses, whether a vehicle was there or not, the illumination and so on."

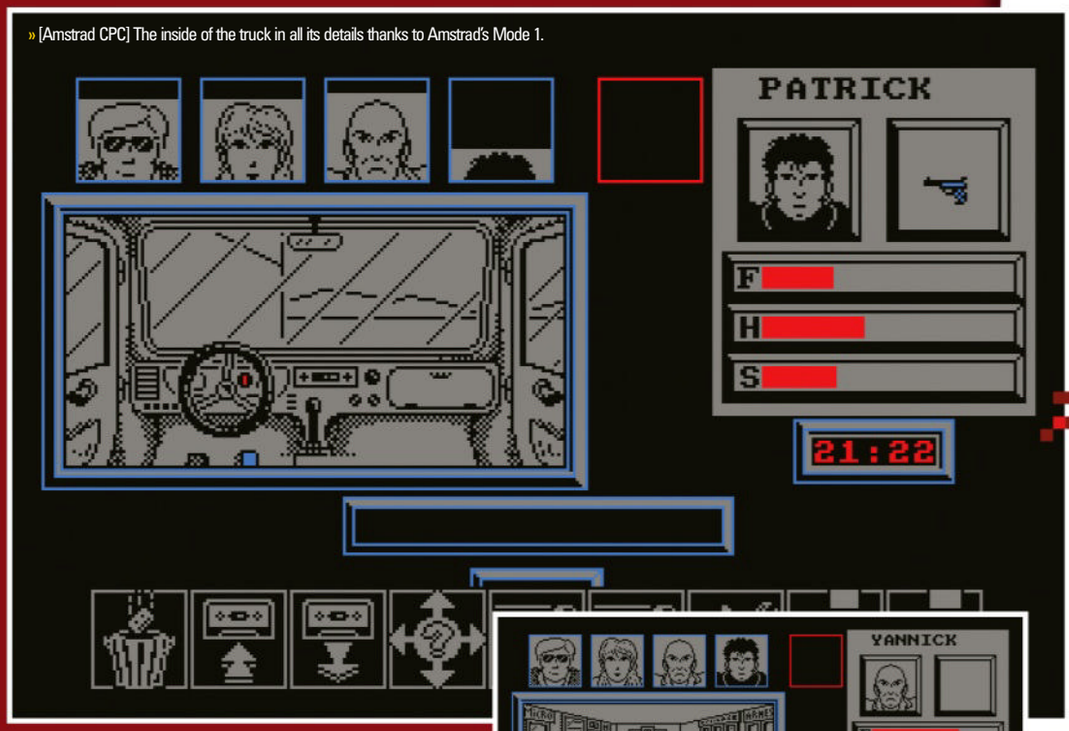
Indeed, as explained before, Patrick had imagined most aspects of the game ahead of its early development and coding days, before Ubisoft contacted him. He tells us that his graphic style unconsciously refers to French and Belgian Bande Dessinée, "I've always had a tendency to draw in a cartoon style, avoiding too much realism. I liked to draw black outlines around my characters, in order to separate pictorial elements from each other. It gave a drawn aspect to the pixels and it eventually looked a bit like what is done for a Bande Dessinée. You would use Indian ink to give a proper shape and someone would colourise inside this shape."

Two graphic modes of the Amstrad CPC were exploited during development. The



» [Amstrad CPC] Close combat fighting involves some *Combat School* training to raise the red gauge.





» [Amstrad CPC] The inside of the truck in all its details thanks to Amstrad's Mode 1.

title screen, designed by Patrick used Mode 0, allowing 16 colours but a lower resolution and horizontally extended pixels. It's colourful, while the game scenes, designed with Mode 1, look monochrome. Although it only utilised four colours, Mode 1 had a higher resolution as Patrick explains. "The game scenes were small, set in a frame, surrounded by elements such as health indicators, character portraits or action icons. We chose Mode 1 in a 320x200 resolution for these screens for this reason, and also because disk access was faster, with quicker image decompression."

As a result of using these technical constraints, *Zombi*'s atmosphere proved to be notably unique, almost oppressive, particularly as you needed to escape from the mall within a limited amount of time. Stress management was essential, since the undead could pop up in any of the rooms you could visit. These constraints also changed the usual adventure game's looks. "All the objects you could take in-hand or use were easy to identify, because their colours were different from the scenes'," explains Yannick. Indeed, it wasn't necessary to look for one object or another by moving a mouse pointer around, as in the case in most point-and-click videogames.

Another idea was to implement action phases in *Zombi*, which was also quite unusual for the classic adventure game scene. Whenever a living dead creature appeared on-screen, represented by a zombie face icon, you had to either shoot at it with one of the guns you could find in the mall or fight it in close combat. Shooting meant pressing a key at the right moment. A bar would move from left to right and you needed to press whenever it was as close to the center as possible. Close combat meant moving the joystick – or pressing Z, X and left and right arrows on the keyboard – very quickly to see the zombie's health depleted. Our interviewees' points of views differ on the matter. Patrick considers games like *Track & Field* were an inspiration, while Yannick explains, "I really involuntarily

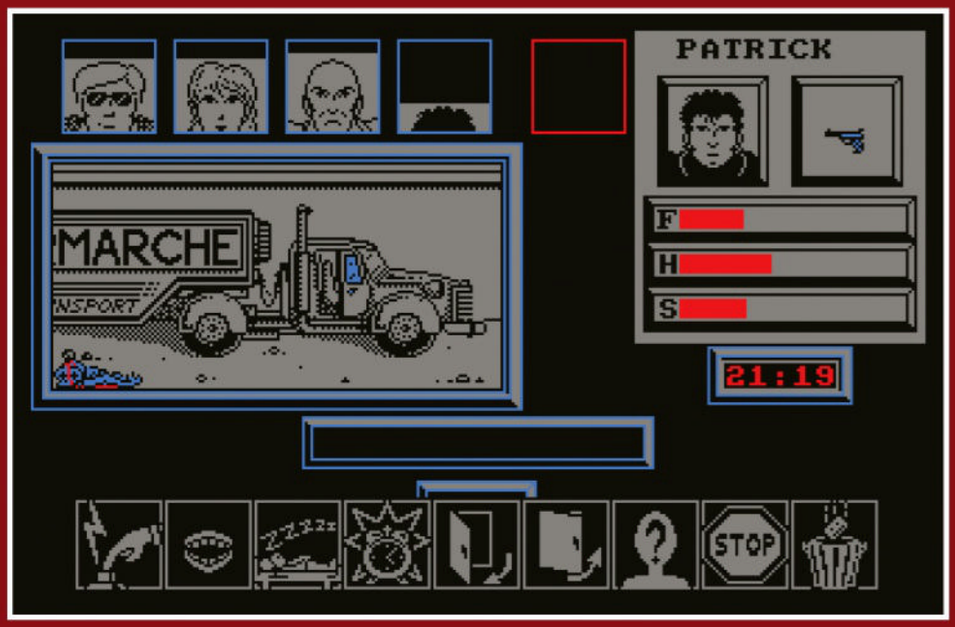
» [Amstrad CPC] Corpses stay on the ground after you kill them, in a different colour.

» [Amstrad CPC] Objects you can interact with are very conveniently set in colour.

CREATING HURLEMENTS

FROM THE LIVING DEAD TO LYCANTHROPY

After being impressed by the metamorphosis sequence from the film *The Howling*, Yannick Cadin decided to develop a game about werewolves. "I could use the *Zombi* game engine again," he told us. "I just needed to create a story, with its plot and challenges. This time I just borrowed from the film its [French] title, a few werewolves to scare the player thirsty for excitement, and that's it. This adventure has nothing to do with the film." Technically, since in *Zombi*'s code the story and the interface are dissociated, it hadn't been too difficult to develop *Hurlements*. Yannick requested graphics from Frédéric Spirin, music from François-Xavier Talgorn and built everything by modifying a few necessary lines of code to adapt the game to its new level design. "I had all the freedom I needed to create this game, since Ubisoft's publishing activity was only a cover up; they never ordered any videogame specifically." Working conditions had evolved since *Zombi*'s development months. This time Yannick could work remotely until he delivered the game, as a producer, writer and coder. A fan developed a remake that has been updated in 2016. Yannick sees this as a "beautiful homage defying some reviewers who criticised *Hurlements* in 1988 for using *Zombi*'s engine once again".



» [Amstrad CPC] This truck has to be moved in front of the mall entrance, in a very *Dawn Of The Dead* way.

» [Amstrad CPC] The title screen designed with Amstrad's Mode 0 loads with some very atmospheric music.

» [Amstrad CPC] Ubisoft was recruiting through in-game wall advertisements.

» [Amstrad CPC] Coders were especially welcome to the development studio.

copied these sports games' mechanics, since I don't remember at all having played any of these types of games before. I thought that when it comes to close combat the player needs to be physically involved and endure a demanding process."

But Yannick also pleads guilty regarding *Zombi*'s action sequences, "I need to shamefully admit here that my programming skills started to reach their limitations. I don't excel in coding arcade-type games. I had to find a compromise between venturing on new territory, risking to spend too much time on it without any guarantee of getting good results, or just coding what I felt capable of coding. And this particular option has been chosen for *Zombi*."

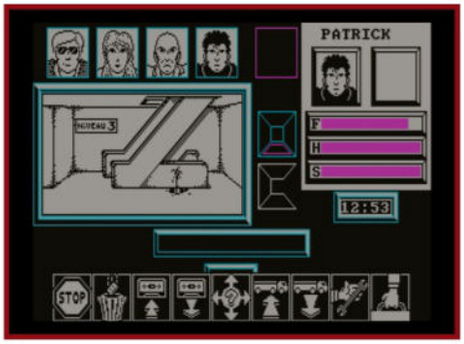
With action, exploration in real-time and puzzle-solving phases all included in a videogame using a new universal user interface deprived of any text; this raises a legitimate question: how to categorise *Zombi*? "At the time, one of the most essential computer product stores located on boulevard de Strasbourg in Paris,

CONVERSION CAPERS

WHICH VERSIONS OF ZOMBI WERE WORTH BRAVING THE UNDEAD HORDES?

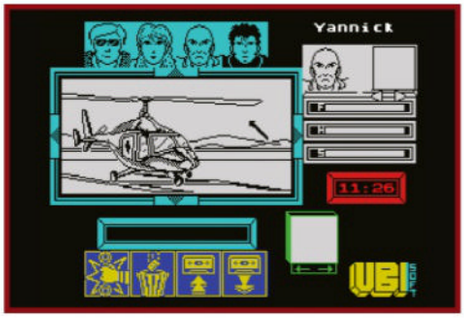
C64

■ The programmer of this port congratulated Yannick for his original clear code, making the latter easy to adapt to different hardware. It's a port very close to the original, particularly in terms of the user interface, graphics and game design.



PC DOS

■ It took Yannick only a week to port *Zombi* to MS-DOS, with a will to code a first 'real' program in Pascal. Needless to say this version is as close as the original CPC 6128 version as can be.



ZX SPECTRUM

■ A very decent port offering a different user interface operated with a mouse pointer. Opponents pop up in the scene part of the in-game screen and need to be targeted with this pointer. The graphics are very similar to the CPC original.

General Video, published small catalogues added as advertisements in some magazines," Yannick tells us. "Software was categorised there and when *Zombi* was launched they had no idea which genre to pick and which list they could add it to. This catalogue's editors decided to create a new category 'action and adventure'. George Romero's unofficial *Dawn Of The Dead* videogame adaptation stood for some time as the only title in this list."

According to Yannis, the Guillimot brothers started off with a strict policy about its in-house projects, as it didn't want other publishers to know that Ubisoft was connected to Guillemot International (see the Early Beginnings panel). As a result, the early days of the company weren't exactly conventional. "There were no test periods before the release of a game back then," offers Patrick. "The only people testing the soon to be released games were the developers themselves, not necessarily realising how difficult they were for any newcomers."

Yannick adds, "There was indeed no one whose job was to assess if a game was actually working or not. They had to look good but verifying whether anyone could finish them was secondary. During *Hurlements*' development, a few days before the game's release, I spotted a minor bug and made a phone call, offering to bring in a bug-free version. Clearly, they soon made me understand that it wasn't worth spending 60 French Francs to create another reference disk to be duplicated and sent off to the distributors."

> "I THOUGHT THAT WHEN IT COMES TO CLOSE COMBAT THE PLAYER NEEDS TO BE PHYSICALLY INVOLVED AND ENDURE A DEMANDING PROCESS"
> YANNICK CADIN

Ubisoft launched as a successful publishing company thanks to *Zombi*, and when Nintendo launched its new Wii U hardware in 2012, a game named *ZombiU* was part of the line-up. Interestingly, both games are not related. According to *ZombiU*'s creative director, Florent Sacré, the *Zombi* name had just been picked by someone from Ubisoft's marketing as a nod to Yannick, Alexandre and Patrick's game. "Originally," explains Florent, "the aim was to develop a survival horror game with the Raving Rabbids named *Killer Freaks From Outer Space*. The living dead were so trendy then that we simply put zombies everywhere in the game in order to convince Ubisoft's management to support our project." [Shame, that *Rabbids* game sounds ace – Ed]. Despite its quite surprising development environment, *Zombi* achieved commercial and critical success in France soon after its launch, although the UK press shared mixed feelings about it a few months later.

In *Amtix!* issue 15 there was nothing but praise for Ubisoft's first game, and it scored 93%. "Although initially it might strike you as odd to have an adventure game with so much joystick pounding in it, it really does work. *Zombi* is a superb game that deserves to do well." *Amstrad Action*, on the other hand, complained about the game being difficult to understand at first, awarding it 69%, also noting that, "The graphics and layout are of a high quality, the instructions are somewhere in the English Channel, and me, I'm confused!"

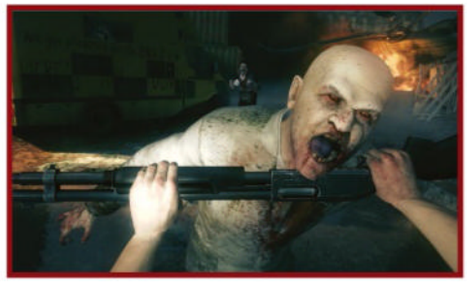
Considering the sheer size and scale of the Ubisoft of today, it's amazing to think that its origins can be traced back to an unofficial adaptation of a cult movie.

AMIGA

■ For some this is the ultimate version of *Zombi*, offering an easier to use interface and real use of a mouse pointer. We can only disagree with the decision to colour in the game's graphics, as it now offers a less oppressing atmosphere than the original monochromatic style, as well as way less detailed and precise graphics.

ATARI ST

■ A similar port to the Amiga, with flashy colours and a mouse pointer interface. Zombies and Hell's Angels are moving around and you need to point at them to shoot and kill. Once again, colours diminish the original oppressive atmosphere.



» [Wii U] *ZombiU* actually shares no connection with *Zombi*, according to Florent Sacré, who worked on the game.

retro GAMER's FAVOURITE...

AGA ENHANCED AMIGA GAMES

THE AMIGA 1200 AND 4000 MODELS FEATURED THE AGA CHIPSET WHICH IMPROVED THE COMPUTER'S GRAPHICS PERFORMANCE. BUT HOW MANY STANDARD AMIGA (OCS) GAMES WERE MEANINGFULLY UPDATED TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE NEW HARDWARE? LET'S ROUND UP THE BEST

Words by Martyn Carroll

JAMES POND II: CODENAME ROBOCOD

Like too many early AGA upgrades, this one follows the 'fresh coat of paint' approach, using the enhanced graphics modes to add more colourful backgrounds to Millennium's popular platformer. But it was also among the first to introduce exclusive content in the form of five brand-new levels. Not a lot, but it was something.

MORPH

For this Millennium upgrade, programmer Peter Johnson must have looked at *Robocod*'s five new levels and said, "I'll raise you 12, Mr Pond." The new levels were more challenging and designed to counter press criticism of the original OCS release that the game was too easy. Of course, the graphics were enhanced too.

SABRE TEAM

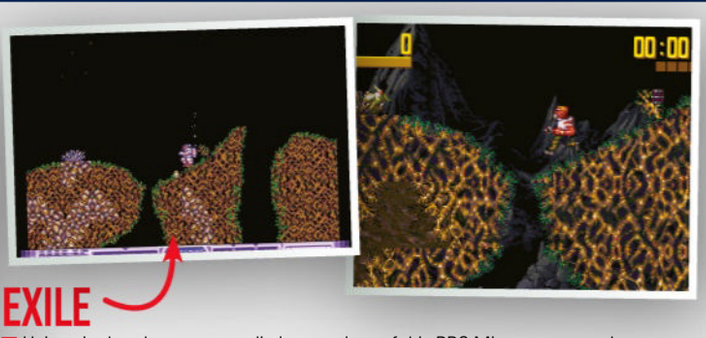
This turn-based strategy game from Krisalis was well received when it debuted in 1992, with one reservation – the computer took ages to make its move. The 1994 AGA upgrade reduces this time considerably, improving the playing experience no end. The presentation is also enhanced, with extra speech and introductory screens.

JURASSIC PARK

Ocean changed its approach for this movie licence, prioritising the AGA version with a pared-back OCS version following later. This allowed the team to add the excellent FPS sections to this otherwise routine tie-in. These sections are also in the OCS version… look at the screens, can you tell which version is which? Hmm.

URIDIUM II

■ Andrew Braybrook's sequel to his C64 classic approached the AGA Amigas in a novel way. There was just a signal release, but if AGA hardware was detected, it unlocked Mayhem mode. This 'extra action' mode added more on-screen sprites and increased the speed of your Manta ship. The audio and visuals were also enhanced.



EXILE

■ Unique in that there are two distinct versions of this BBC Micro remaster: the original OCS version released in 1991 (pictured left) and the 1995 AGA version that was built from the ground up and features completely reworked graphics. The latter is not necessarily the most playable version, but it sure looks a lot nicer.

PGA EUROPEAN GOLF

■ Like *Jurassic Park*, this was AGA first, OCS later, and the visual difference is stark. That's an AGA screen on the right, looking more like the Mega Drive version with its textured graphics. In comparison the OCS version is giving off C64 *Leaderboard* vibes. That's an exaggeration, but the game is far better looking on AGA.

FIGHTIN' SPIRIT

■ This goes toe to toe with *Body Blows Galactic* as the best fighter on AGA Amigas. However, that game only adds extra colours to the backgrounds, compared to the OCS version, while Light Shock Software's *Fightin' Spirit* also enhances the sprites, making it a more desirable upgrade. The late-1996 release shows that the Amiga could still surprise.

SUPER STARDUST

■ Presented as a sequel, *Super Stardust* is essentially the AGA version of the original *Stardust* that was released for standard Amigas in 1993. The main *Asteroids*-style sections have received a cosmetic touch-up and look better than ever, but it's the upgraded 3D tunnel sections that really impress – even now.

TURRICAN II: THE FINAL FIGHT

■ None of the *Turrican* games were AGA enhanced – at least not until 2022 when Sonic Sloth issued this excellent upgrade of the second game based on the 256-colour PC version. The original release was hardly shabby, but this really does blow it away. The added feature list is extensive, making it the definite experience.

THIS TAPE WILL SELF-DESTRUCT IN...

...PERHAPS NOT THE FIVE SECONDS MADE FAMOUS BY MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE. ENEMY AGENTS WITH NAMES LIKE HYDROLYSIS AND STICK-SLIP ARE HARD AT WORK THOUGH. RETRO GAMER SQUEEZES OUR NEWEST REPORTER INTO A TOM CRUISE JUMPSUIT AND WINCHES HIM DOWN THE TAPE PRESERVATION RABBIT HOLE

WORDS BY ADAM PETERS

Recent-ish events (COVID, childhood home sale, cost of living) have seen this writer join many others in flogging off accumulated stuffs. I've been out on eBay Avenue like a hyperactive Del Boy, bagging and tagging board games, videogames, books and Smurfs; tearfully waving them off at the post office towards buyers' doormats. A couple of thousand items sold across several hundred lots, with only one returned for a refund.

It was of course a cassette. Not a game (Joy Division compilation if you're being nosey) but it made me fearful regarding the ZX81, Spectrum and Amstrad tapes I was also shipping out. Ian Curtis going a bit high-pitched for a second isn't as bad as a load-failing dropout on *Dizzy Finds Yet Another Cave 17*. Surprisingly, I never had a problem from buyers of my games. Were these super resilient tapes, or are most collectors of gaming cassettes more interested in the physical item and inlay, rather than trying to load directly from it?

There's no way to sugar coat this (or even jam coat it, more on that later) but gaming tapes are an endangered species. Perceived wisdom gives compact audio cassettes an average working shelf life of 30 years. The medium peaked for UK gamers around 1986. We're not going to scare you with how long ago that was, but almost all original games cassettes have exceeded that 30-year shelf life. How do we save those which remain?

It's worth first considering why cassettes became such a popular gaming format in the first place, particularly for those of us in the UK. American platforms like the C64 had them as an option, but virtually every Eighties British games system (from Acorn, Amstrad, Sinclair et al) put games on tapes front and centre.

"Fundamentally, cassette games were a lot cheaper to manufacture," explains Paul 'Paulie' Hughes. Having created innovative utilities such as Freeload ('the Ocean loader') for the C64, Paul remains a huge advocate for tapes, "In the early days the Commodore 1541 disk drive was prohibitively expensive in the UK, plus as slow as molasses. The BBC Micro did a lot better on the floppy drive front, but cassette technology was already well established and cheap to produce, which kept the base price of systems down."

Games designer Mike Dailly (of *Lemmings* and early *GTA* fame) echoes Paul's thoughts, suggesting most Brits couldn't afford disk drives in a recession-hit era. Whilst acknowledging the ubiquity of cassette machines in UK homes at the time, well-known Electron and BBC Micro games developer Peter Scott has a different theory, "We Brits famously love a queue, and loading a game from cassette is surely the technological equivalent of that?"

When we use our secret agent Morse code transmitter to contact cassette

INTERVIEWEES

» Amanda Bassett runs Sussex-based UK Tape To DVD which converts analogue tape to digital formats.

» Arttu Yläräkkola is a Finnish games collector who happily "gets more out of a game if I load it slowly".

» Colin Polonowski is a West Country Spectrum and Atari fan who has run many popular retro-gaming sites.

» Joaquín Gallardo's collecting specialities are Ultimate Play The Game titles on the Spectrum and joysticks.

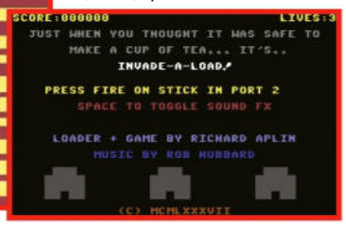
» Jaime González Soriano runs the massive GUA archive in Spain, which currently houses almost 10,000 computer cassettes.

» Mike Dailly is the Scottish games designer behind *Lemmings* and early incarnations of *Grand Theft Auto*.

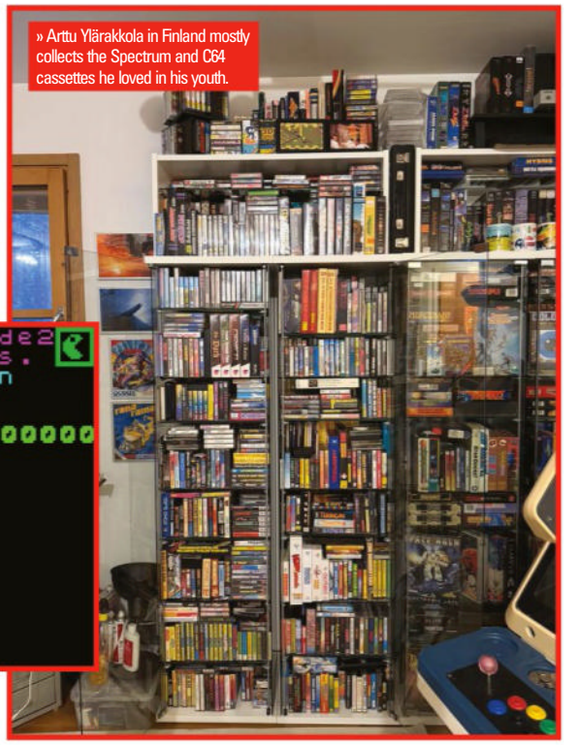
» Paul 'Paulie' Hughes is perhaps best known for creating Freeload (the so-called 'Ocean loader') for C64.

Image Credits: Hans Lucas/AFP via Getty Images

» [C64] *Operation Wolf* was amongst many C64 games using Freeload to make loading less boring.


SCORE:000000
LIVES:3
JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT IT WAS SAFE TO
MAKE A CUP OF TEA... IT'S..
INVADE-A-LOAD!
PRESS FIRE ON STICK IN PORT 2
SPACE TO TOGGLE SOUND FX
LOADER + GAME BY RICHARD APLIN
MUSIC BY ROB HUBBARD
(C) MCMLXXXVII

» Minigames during C64 loading often aped *Pac Man* or (as here) Space Invaders.



» Arttu Yläräkkola in Finland mostly collects the Spectrum and C64 cassettes he loved in his youth.

» [C64] Arttu's favourite C64 game *Wizball* (1986) was the first to use Paul Hughes' Freeload speed loader.

» [ZX Spectrum] Can a loading game be better than the actual game? Many *Joe Blade 2* (Spectrum) buyers thought so.

CAUTION: POLICE TAPE

FOUR KEY WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR CASSETTES

KEEPING THINGS COOL

■ Don't go sticking your tapes in the freezer (loads of other issues there) but try keeping them in a cool room away from direct sunlight. The shell of an original cassette is decades-old plastic that may warp near heat sources, whilst humidity risks white flaky mould through binder shedding.

TRUSTING IN DUSTING

■ Cassette tape is 3.81mm wide, so it doesn't take much of an incursion to cover a vital part of that surface. Scrunching (particularly from a tape jam) is an extreme example, but also beware of dust, insects etc. Storing your tapes vertically in their boxes is a great start.

THE MAGNETIC FIELDS

■ Stephin Merrit of said indie band might not destroy your cassettes (we don't know him well enough to be sure to be honest) but sources such as loudspeakers, old TVs or Marvel's Magneto potentially could. Tapes do store data as magnetic patterns embedded into rust-coated plastic, after all.

PLAYING THINGS SAFE

■ Even if your tapes are hermetically sealed, loading one requires ensuring your cassette player isn't going to damage it. Maintain and clean said player. Store tapes wound to one end. Consider playing each cassette through once per year to distribute tension and alleviate sticking.

Image Credits: Getty Images/iStockphoto/ Evgeny Sergeev, Getty Images/JulNichols, Shutterstock / Rob Hyrons.

» Whilst American C64 users gravitated to disk, this beast held sway in many UK homes.

» You don't need a massive setup when you're driven by retro passion the way Joaquín Gallardo is.

» Jaime's vast Grupo de Usarios de Amstrad (GUA) features every variant of tapes like the CPC system demo.

AGENTS OF DESTRUCTION

AN EXPERT IN THE FIELD HAS VITAL INTEL

■ Richard L Hess, based in Ontario, Canada, is world renowned for tape restoration. The University Of California's digital archive of the earliest US tape recordings bears his name as engineer and compiler. Richard talks **Retro Gamer** through the risks to games tapes in more detail. "Loss or degradation to the pressure pad is the leading cause of dropouts, which is why high-end Nakamichi cassette players push the pressure pad out of the way to maintain tape tension across the heads via dual capstans instead. Breaking of the splices at head or tail is another big risk, whilst storing tapes under hot or humid conditions may cause the magnetic coating to flake off the base film."

» Ontario-based Richard L Hess is regarded as the world's leading expert on digitising from tape sources.

What of agents Hydrolysis and Stick-Slip? "This is more common on larger reel-to-reel formats, but some cassettes can be affected by binder hydrolysis, causing the tape to suffer from stick-slip on playback. This is sometimes accompanied by an audible squeal. There may be other non-hydrolysis causes for squeal; the research around this is conflicting. Stick-slip would certainly render the tape difficult to read.

"It's an annoying harshness and chalk-on-blackboard sound in audio, but would manifest for games cassette data as bit errors."

» Richard in action, saving a faulty cassette by splicing the tape into a new shell.

» Colin Polonowski puts *Dizzy* games at the heart of his cassette collecting, as this image demonstrates.

» The Sord M5 is one of 35 systems the GUA archive in Spain owns original cassettes for.

» The copy protection chart for the MSX version of *Jet Set Willy* was almost poster sized!

collectors, the majority actually come from elsewhere in Europe. "I believe it's not a geographical matter but a historical one," insists Jaime González Soriano of Spain's GUA archive. "Tape was the obvious, cheapest medium to use at the outset. The market matured towards disks or cartridges, but that process happened much faster in North America. Tape-friendly systems like the CPC, Spectrum and C64 retained popularity for a long time across Europe."

At the opposite end of the continent, Finland's Arttu Ylärakkola points out that platform popularity varied by country, "Finland had the most C64 systems per capita in the world. C64 completely dominated; ZX Spectrum was a distant second, with Amstrad and MSX systems far behind. That situation hasn't changed in 40 years: Commodore-related retro communities are extremely active here, whilst others are more or less dead." That trigger word reminds us of the mission. It's time to interrogate our contacts about what they collect and why.

Jaime's reply provides a hint as to how many tape-based platforms there were back then, "We have 9,800 cassettes, featuring games and utilities for 35 systems including Camputers Lynx, Sord M5, EACA Colour Genie, Sharp X1, Sega SC-3000 and Fujitsu FM-7. Our primary goal is to digitise all these programs, their inlays and manuals. We focus on preserving data, rather than collecting the media as marketed, and seek to make programs work at any cost. Sometimes we'll put the reel of tape into another casing so it spins properly. Repairs are often needed, the most common being snapped tape or worn pressing pads, but it's difficult to find a totally unreadable tape!"

Arttu's collection is smaller, focussing on his preferred platforms, "I have 600 Spectrum and 500 C64 games, with all but one of the former (an IF1 cartridge) and 80% of the latter being on cassette. I also have a few VIC-20, ZX81 and MSX tapes. The Spectrum was my favourite computer and most of its games were on cassette, so I naturally favour that format. Only one tape doesn't work and that's actually a cassette game released in the 2010s. Eventually none of them will work, but I am OK with that. My favourites are those I liked back in the day, such as *Jet Set Willy* on the Spectrum, *Wizball* on the C64, etc."

"Cassettes definitely feel more retro than other games media," asserts West Country collector Colin Polonowski. "Many bedroom coders from the Eighties remain involved in the industry today. We used to complain about how long games took to load, but there's something special now about watching loading lines and the gradual build of a loading screen. It's almost as nostalgic as the games themselves. Physically holding cassettes that were made in the Eighties feels like an important connection too."

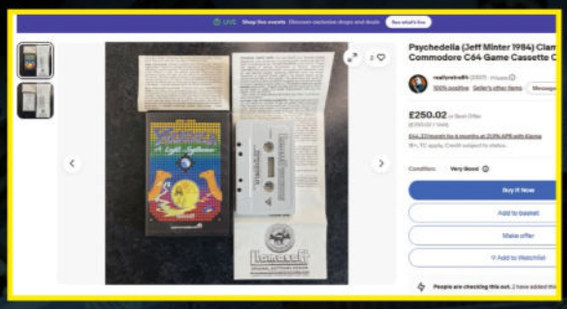
Spanish collector Joaquín Gallardo concurs, "For me, the cassette represents a ritual. I have disk drives, microdrives, ZXMMC, but I still love using the original tapes. Assembling the computer, loading from the cassette, using the time it takes to load to read magazine articles about the game... it's a nostalgia thing. It reminds me of better times when life was easier, I didn't have so many worries, and relatives/friends were still alive and well."

Tape's limitations lead to many innovations, as Paul explains, "The key with fast loaders was striking a balance between loading speed and the ability to reliably duplicate a mass of tapes at high speed. Many tape-loading problems come from the speed at which they were duplicated. When a tape's signal is being recorded at 10x speed there is some 'stretching' of that signal. If a cassette read head's azimuth alignment is just slightly off, that might prevent loading."

Mike Dailly experienced such issues as a developer, "Cassettes were picky, especially when turbo load/saved. When I was still using tapes to dev (on the Commodore Plus/4) I'd save out three copies and then one 'slow copy' just to be sure. We've all had turbo games not load before, especially on the Spectrum; it would get all the way through, then just reset. For dev I didn't have many problems, and I moved to using disks on the C64."

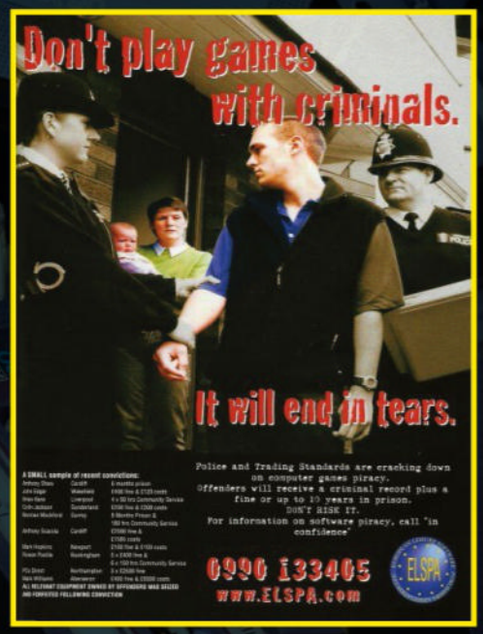
"As games got bigger with multi-loaded levels, loading times became a real issue," notes Paul. "Freeload tried to 'fill' that time with music and animation, but it was still a linear process. Cartridges and disks became more attractive to gamers, shifting the waiting to publishers. It could take months from a master to finished cartridges. Meanwhile, if I dropped off a master

» Continued tape usage is clear from the ongoing availability of these cleaning products.



» With an asking price of £250, light synthesiser Psychedelia (C64, 1984) is a rare cassette.

» The Amstrad 7090 (1982) pioneered tape-to-tape copying to the music and games industries' disgust.


Don't play games with criminals.
It will end in tears.
Police and Trading Standards are cracking down on computer games piracy.
Offenders will receive a criminal record plus a fine or up to 10 years in prison.
DON'T RISK IT.
For information on software piracy, call 'in confidence'
0990 133405
www.ELSPA.com
ELSPA

» Industry body ELSPA ran hard-hitting adverts trying to deter those copying games.

▶ maker at cassette duplicators Ablex at 10am, I'd be driving back at 3pm with 5,000 boxed tapes ready to go into stores."

The availability of tape-to-tape machines sent publishers and pirates into battle. Paul created code to trick these devices into nerfing a copy's audio levels. Peter had a different solution, revealed here for the first time, "I added a line to my loader that tried to save out one byte of data. Only a 'tape write-protected' error would continue the loading. Most pirated copies didn't bother to punch out (or had taped over) the protection tab, thus wouldn't load."

Such history is worth protecting alongside the cassettes, as Jaime acknowledges, "What's unique about tapes are the tricks invented, either to make it difficult to duplicate them or make the loading wait more pleasant. The latter includes minigames and music. For example, Electronic Arts was marketed in Spain by Dro Soft, founded by post-punk synthpop band Aviador Dro. The band members were computer geeks and decided to include some of their own songs whilst games were loading!"

"Cassettes as a medium are now making a comeback much like vinyl did," points out Mike, "and new games are still being released on tape, so it remains a living format. Many of my own games have been rescued into a TZX-style format, meaning they could be recreated onto tape again if someone wanted to. It's not the media that I miss (tapes were slow and could be annoying) but the loading screens and music that went with it. Some of that loading music still sings to me."

Tape restoration expert Richard L Hess believes saving the data on your cassettes out digitally (as soon as possible) is the most sensible approach. "CDs and DVDs are not a long-term storage option as they have degradation issues of their own," he tells us. "You could of course copy your old cassette to a new cassette. However, even if using the highest quality tape and recorder, each new analogue copy is going to be a downgrade. Read errors will inevitably increase with each copy."

"I've successfully converted hundreds of cassettes to digital format for customers," says Amanda Bassett of UK Tape To DVD, "but I've never been asked to convert a games cassette. It's certainly something I'd be happy to do. The damage caused by tape deterioration is in the most part irreversible. Broken tapes can be repaired, and in some cases tapes can be cleaned with specialist fluids, but this is a lengthy and time-consuming process requiring the tape to be hand wound. Converting to a digital format is your best preservation option."

The collectors we spoke to have already digitised most or all of their tapes. "All my cassettes still work," notes Joaquín, "and I store them in a dark, dry place. The cassette players are more problematic; I've had to fit new belts on some of them. Of course, I have digital copies on ZXMMC drives, emulators and two The Spectrums, but the original tapes are more collectible and look great in my computer lair."

Colin feels the same, "While I love the loading experience, I avoid using my actual cassettes too much. I store them the best I can at home, but I'm not doing anything special. I generally play from backups via USB on The Spectrum or ZXDB on the Next. I recently bought a new, old stock, cassette player to use as an occasional treat. I do worry about a future where nobody owns anything they buy. I can see many games that people loved becoming unavailable to future generations."

Our interviewees agree that cassettes seem more resilient than the 30-year-theory suggests. This could be a problem if you actually want to prevent a tape from loading. "Imagine you're a handsome bedroom games developer who can't quite meet their deadline," says Peter Scott on condition of anonymity, "in a pre-interweb era where you physically post media to the publisher. A huge magnetic wall telephone whose ringing is guaranteed to corrupt floppy disks grants you a few extra days. Every deadline-missing games dev in the North East used my phone on occasion."

Corrupting cassettes proved far harder, "The phone couldn't do it. The easiest way to gubber a tape was to scrunch it up, but that's pretty obvious. A thin layer of jam on a few sections of the tape did the trick, but you then had to explain to your publisher why the faulty cassette you sent them smelled of strawberries!"

Backing away from Peter, we bump into games producer turned best-selling author John Higgs, who finds our entire topic bizarre, "So in the Eighties we converted digital data into an analogue format because it was cheap, and now decades later we have to convert it back to digital to ensure it survives. That's as beautifully bonkers as the gaming industry and Eighties Britain in general."

A tug on our back indicates we're being winched back out of this rabbit hole. We adopt the free-fall position and rise a few feet before a screeching halt. John, who is still waving us off, looks on in concern. We look back, albeit mostly at John's groin. Awkward pause. Another tug or two but no movement. Fifty feet above, there's a shout of, "It's jammed!" It seems this article on tape preservation has ended with a winding error. BOOM! ✱ ▶

BUILT-IN TAPE COUNTER

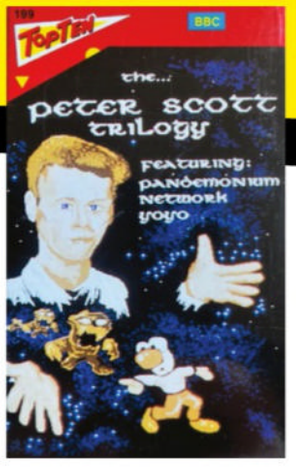
ARE GAME CASSETTES AS RARE AS WE THINK?

» Electron and BBC Micro games developer Peter Scott later produced videogame TV shows and animation.

■ Are we being overdramatic when pondering some games sold on tape disappearing forever? The likes of *Jet Set Willy* and *Manic Miner* reportedly sold 200,000-ish cassette copies just on the Spectrum, but there were 450 publishers of games tapes in the UK alone in late-1983. Most titles shipped way fewer. Exhibit A: *The Peter Scott Trilogy.*

"I was always told the sales of my games across various platforms and formats," Peter tells us. "For bigger companies like Superior Software, I got dozens of pages of detailed spreadsheets. From Top Ten Software, who put out the *Trilogy* (three of my old unpublished BBC Micro platformers) in 1986, I just got the raw figures. They manufactured 600 copies of said cassette and sold, perhaps fittingly for the company name, precisely ten!

"I don't know how many of the 590 copies left in a warehouse ended up in landfill or later resurfaced. I bought a shrink-wrapped copy on eBay a couple of years ago for the original sale price of £2.99. Make of that what you will. Perhaps I should buy up every copy, if only to relegate that cringey cover (my cartoon floating head) to history. PS Please tell me you're not using it in the mag."



Shadow Of The Beast

MY GOD, IT'S FULL OF LAYERS

» RETROREVIVAL

» AMIGA » 1989 » REFLECTIONS

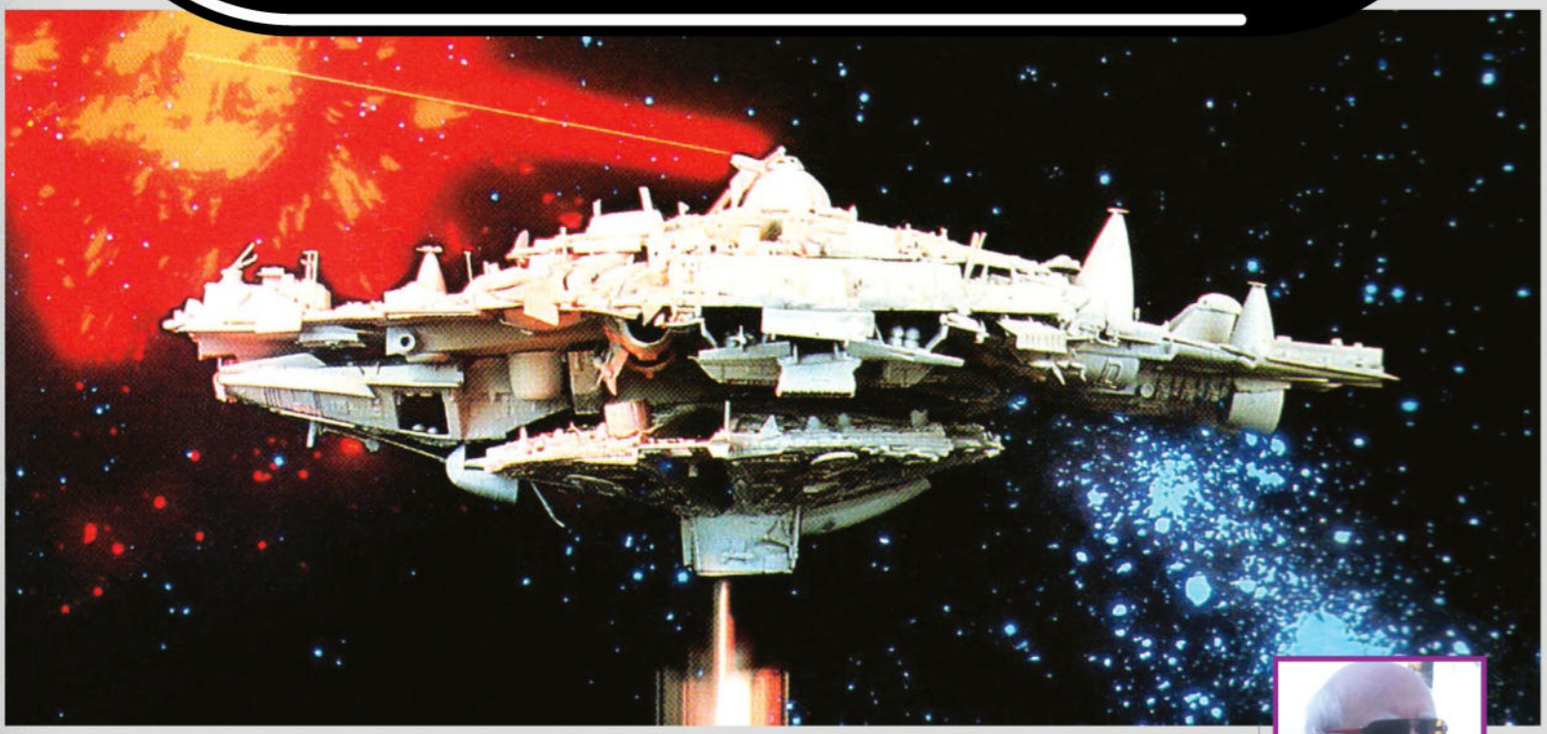
Like many of you I guess, the first time I saw an Amiga was in a computer store. In my local town there were a surprising number of such shops. At one end of the respectability scale you had the grungy Castle Computers, seemingly run by teenagers who spent their shifts attacking each other with a pricing gun. And at the other end there was Micro Education, a serious shop where the main guy wore a shirt and tie and viewed us youngsters with rightful suspicion.

I remember being in Micro Education one Saturday morning, in what must have been 1989, and they had an Amiga 500 up and running, displaying a demo. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing… a cartoon frog swinging on a tree swing while an unknown man berated it in a broad Yorkshire accent. (Note to self: I need to track this demo down as I'm 99.9% sure it's real and I didn't dream it up.) Fast-forward to another Saturday and I stood in the same spot, only this time it was a rolling demo of *Shadow Of The Beast*. It showed the eponymous 'beast' running along that open plain from the beginning of the game. The whole scene seemed alive, with true depth thanks to God knows how many levels of parallax scrolling. You had a crumbling stone wall in the foreground, then the path and the trees, stretching back to the mountains in the far distance. And then up in the sky there were several rows of clouds in front of a moon (and a blimp thrown in for good measure). Actually, I did know how many levels of parallax scrolling were responsible for this incredible effect: 13. This was because the demo advertised the fact, along with other impressive stats: 128 colours, one thousand this, one million that. Seeing *Shadow Of The Beast* running for the first time was a transformative moment for me and I'm sure many others.

I wouldn't get my own Amiga and a copy of the game for another three years, when – yes – I'd discover that the gameplay wasn't up to much. I honestly didn't care. I'd just replay that opening scene, completely agog. And even now, as I grabbed the screen displayed here, it still manages to impress.

A TRIBUTE TO

IMAGIC



ONLY THE SECOND INDEPENDENT US CONSOLE DEVELOPER, IMAGIC CREATED BEST-SELLING TITLES FOR THE ATARI 2600 AND THE MATTEL INTELLIVISION SUCH AS DEMON ATTACK, ATLANTIS AND COSMIC ARK. FOUNDER DENNIS KOBLE LOOKS BACK AT THE FIRM'S BIGGEST GAMES

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

Established in 1981 by former Atari and Mattel employees, Imagic's unique selling point was that it supported both the Atari 2600 and Intellivision.

By far the most successful of Imagic's releases in its first year in business was the compelling Atari 2600 shoot-'em-up *Demon Attack*. 1982 also saw the company's Atari group produce the fixed-turret shooter *Atlantis*, the rescue mission-based *Cosmic Ark*, the action adventure *Riddle Of The Sphinx* and the medieaval collect-a-thon *Dragonfire*.

For its Intellivision output for the year, Imagic's Mattel group impressed with its *Donkey Kong* tribute *Beauty & The Beast*, the medical-themed *Microsurgeon* and adaptations of *Demon Attack* and *Atlantis*.

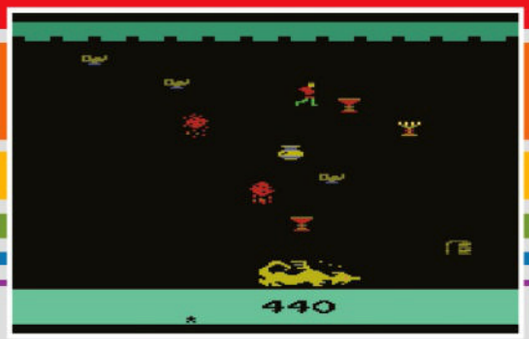
Building on its rapid ascent in 1982, Imagic maintained its momentum throughout 1983. Its novel dolphin and sea bird action title *Fathom* graced the Atari 2600, as did a string of shooters in the form of *Laser Gates*, *Moonsweeper*, *No Escape*, *Shootin' Gallery* and *Subterranea*.

On the Intellivision front, some popular releases included a *Fathom* port, the fun action title *Dracula*, the side-scrolling shooter *Nova Blast* and the very technically impressive spy caper *Safecracker*.

Despite the quality of these offerings, Imagic was hit by the US videogame crash of 1983. It laid off nearly a quarter of its staff by the end of the year, and it published very few games in 1984. By 1986, Imagic was gone, and in the late-Eighties the rights to its most popular games were bought by former rival Activision. Despite the passing of time, Imagic titles still appear in collections for modern systems. ✱

DENNIS KOBLE

After working at Atari as VCS manager, among other roles, Dennis Koble became a founding member of Imagic where he was the Atari group manager and a successful developer. His subsequent positions in the games industry included software director at Bally Sente, software producer/director at EA and cofounder of Polygames.



DRAGONFIRE

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS • 1982

Considering that *Dragonfire* consists of just two screens its replay value is quite impressive. Its simple premise sees you sprinting towards a dragon's den, jumping over and ducking under fireballs as you go. If you reach its lair then you can attempt to steal its treasure, but as you do the furious beast darts left and right at the foot of the screen, breathing fire upwards on its way. You need its entire hoard to make an exit appear, which once taken puts you en route to a faster dragon that has more strategic attacks.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

Dragonfire was one of Bob Smith's games, he was very prolific. *Dragonfire* was a good game actually. I enjoyed playing that a lot."

COSMIC ARK

ATARI 2600 • 1982

After blasting asteroids coming from different directions towards your stationary mothership you take a shuttle down to a planet. The goal is to beam up two inhabitants while avoiding lasers. If successful, it's back to defending the mothership as it travels to another world.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

Atlantis had a bit at the end where a ship escapes – a Cosmic Ark, so that was how *Cosmic Ark* tied into *Atlantis*. So we did that, and it was a nice marketing hook. *Cosmic Ark* was pretty well done, and the art was strong in terms of the graphics. It was a good idea. I guess it played totally differently from *Atlantis* just because Rob Fulop did it and not me!"

ATLANTIS

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS • 1982

Dennis Koble's fixed shooter gives you three cannons to defend the fabled city of Atlantis from waves of gradually descending foes. If their lasers destroy the city it's game over, but for every 10,000 points some ruins are repaired.

ACING ATLANTIS HOW TO MASTER THE LOST CITY SHOOTER

THREE STRIKES

Your side cannons are indestructible but tricky to aim. Your central cannon is pretty simple to aim but vulnerable to lasers, so protecting it is key.

HIGH-FLYERS

Enemy ships are defenceless until they're quite low over the city, so just ignore them while they're high-up as they're not going to do any damage.

ATTACK PATTERNS

You face single ships at first, but multiple craft flying in different directions follow. Target the low down ships first with the middle gun.

SPEED DEMONS

The gravest threat to the city of Atlantis is small fast flying ships that appear lower down on the screen. Throw everything at these on sight.

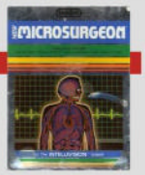
DENNIS' MEMORIES

They made a documentary on *Atlantis*, it was on PBS. They sent a crew and they were there for three days. They did a lot of filming. *Atlantis* was fun to work on because the main artist was quite talented. She did the spaceships and the cities. It wasn't that challenging to make, but it was fun to play and it was visually appealing. I think its success was down to a combination of those two things."

Fathom, Solar Storm, Shootin' Gallery and *Subterranea* box art courtesy of atarimania.com

MICROSURGEON

INTELLIVISION, VARIOUS • 1982



A strategic shooter with exploration, *Microsurgeon* tasks you with navigating a patient's body using a miniature robot that treats different conditions with ultrasonics, antibiotics and aspirin. A status screen reports the condition of each organ so you can go where treatment is needed most.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

I think *Microsurgeon* probably came out after I had left Imagic. Although I do remember a lot about the game, so it was probably in development before that. There were a lot of people at Imagic who were there because games were cool and new. They had very original ideas, and you never knew which ones were going to take off. A lot depended on the execution, but it was also the actual gameplay. If players hadn't seen anything quite like it before it might take off because of that. So you tended to be a lot more laissez-faire."

BEAUTY & THE BEAST

ATARI 2600 • 1982

Two core mechanics differentiate *Beauty & The Beast* from *Donkey Kong*. You use windows to ascend levels that rapidly alternate between open and closed, but climbing only becomes possible when they're open. Then the way you gain temporary protection from projectiles is by collecting hearts.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

The Mattel group operated entirely independently. It was funny. We never really breached that Mattel/Atari division that was created when the company was formed. So consequently I don't recall anybody on the Atari side saying to the Mattel side that they needed to make an Intellivision port of one of our games – or vice versa. That wasn't the way it worked. So *Beauty & The Beast* came along, and there were a couple of others besides that, and they were exclusive to the Mattel group."

DEMON ATTACK

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS • 1982

An engaging test of accuracy and reflexes in shoot-'em-up form, Demon Attack ups the ante by introducing better-armed and more agile enemies that are harder to hit and easier to get taken out by. Further challenge comes from its eclectic demons' distinct attacks. It's extremely similar to the excellent *Phoenix*.

DEVIOUS DEMONS A GUIDE TO DEMON ATTACK'S HELLISH FOES

DEMONS

These base level foes are not to be taken lightly. They attack in threes, dodge your lasers, rain down showers of bullets and regenerate repeatedly before they finally become vulnerable.

SPLIT DEMONS

When you hit some larger demons they split into two, with each half moving apart while staying in close proximity. Once separated, both halves open fire, making your mission even tougher.

DIVING DEMONS

Like *Galaxian*, *Demon Attack* features enemies that split off from the pack and hurtle towards you kamikaze style. These diving demons are smaller than most, so they're tricky to pick off.

DEMON FLAGSHIP

Unlike the Atari 2600 original, the Intellivision *Demon Attack* has a flagship boss that hoards of demons swoop down from. Their strategy is to home in on your position at speed.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

Things had started to change, and one of the changes was bringing in artists. It was amazing, even with the very limited graphics available to them they really did make a difference. Then of course the guy who made the game was Rob Fulop. Rob was most famous for doing a port of *Missile Command* for the Atari 2600, and that was where he learned all the ins and outs of the system. That all helped, and *Demon Attack* turned out to be our most successful product."

RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS • 1982

What's clever about *Riddle Of The Sphinx* is how its action and adventure elements form a cohesive whole. It's also pretty impressive that a fully formed arcade adventure was coaxed out of the humble Atari 2600. There's an inventory system you can cycle through to select items that you've dug up, collected or traded for. You also need to present certain objects at specific locations. All the while you defend yourself from thieves and scorpions using a slingshot while not hitting traders. You also have to avoid vengeful gods and honour benevolent deities to receive healing.

MARVELLOUS MECHANICS

THE COMPELLING GAMEPLAY BEHIND THE SPHINX'S RIDDLE

HARD ROCK

A slingshot is a practical weapon as rocks are abundant, but hitting traders or the god Anubis costs you precious health.

SOLE TRADERS

Nomads make fair trades when you have meagre possessions, but this isn't the case when you have precious items.

TREASURE HUNT

Certain treasures boost strength, speed and shields, one quenches thirst and you take others to sacred monuments.

OH GODS!

Isis will heal your wounds, quench your thirst and give you treasure. Anubis wounds you and drains your strength.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

While I was doing *Trick Shot*, the third of our trio Bob Smith, who unfortunately passed away last year, he did *Riddle Of The Sphinx* based on Rob Fulop's concept. I think there was a certain amount of people developing each other's ideas at Imagic. It wasn't a business place like you might think where people came in at 8 o'clock; all wore suits and ties and went into their cubicles where they worked diligently at their computers. Nah! It wasn't like that at all."

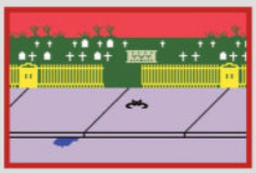
TRICK SHOT

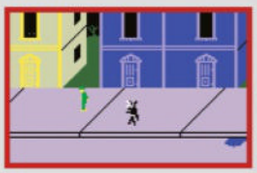
ATARI 2600 • 1982

Although *Trick Shot* greatly simplifies Pool and Billiards it nevertheless captures the essence of the sports. You can rotate your cue through 32 positions around the cue ball, determine your shot's strength by holding down fire and then add spin by directing the joystick before releasing fire. There are also practice and Trick Shot modes where there's one ball on the table at a time.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

Trick Shot was my first cartridge for Imagic, and it actually turned out to be much more difficult than I thought. At the end I had to make it seem like it used real-life physics, but in reality it was largely faked up so that I could have a repeatable game and provide some challenge at the same time. So that caused me many a sleepless night fretting over the technical details. You only had so much RAM on the VCS, and the majority of the code had to take into account controlling the machine, generating the video on the fly basically. So it does look like a game of pool, but it obviously wasn't really."





DRACULA

INTELLIVISION • 1983

As well as boasting novel gameplay, *Dracula* does a remarkable job of adapting the beats of your average vampire flick. Your goal is to dispatch a set number of victims every night before sunrise and then return to your crypt. It seems simple until they sprint away from you, and if there are no pedestrians visible you have to knock at doors to trick some into coming out. To make matters worse, wolves try to stop you in your tracks, and if you turn into a bat to escape them then a vulture appears and attempts to rip your wings off. Lastly, there are stake-wielding coppers. They're persistent and you can't bite them, but you can turn victims into zombies, possess their souls and send them off to dispatch the cops for you.

FATHOM

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS • 1983

In *Fathom* you collect clouds as a bird and amass seahorses as a dolphin in order to reveal starfish. Three starfish gets you Neptune's trident, which is used to rescue his daughter from the seabed. As the levels progress you have to fly further and swim deeper, all while avoiding opponents.

CHARACTER STUDY THE PROTAGONISTS OF IMAGIC'S COLLECT-A-THON

BIRD
The seabird's mission involves negotiating active volcanoes and soaring upwards through flocks of feathered foes. The clouds it has to collect are constantly moving.

DOLPHIN
Shellfish and seaweed drain the dolphin's health as you dive to the ocean bed. If you miss a seahorse then you have to swim to the surface and start again to get it.

SEAHORSE
When you collect a seahorse a starfish appears, securing a second seahorse allows you to take charge of the seabird. Without this trick you're stuck just as the dolphin.

NEPTINA
Rescuing Neptune's daughter seems reasonable, but she keeps getting captured at the start of every level, and each time her prison is located deeper down in the ocean!

DENNIS' MEMORIES

"It's very possible the ideas for *Fathom* came from our 'game storming' sessions at the coast. They were typically held once a year. There would be like 50 game ideas. Now which ones got made wasn't a very formal process; it wasn't like Bob Smith and I sat down and decided to do this one or that one. It had more to do with who was really excited about doing which ideas, and we would do those. It was more like that, it was very casual."

SOLAR STORM

ATARI 2600 • 1983

Opponents and solar debris soar downwards towards your ship and the world you're protecting. Anything that passes you heats the planet, and if it overheats it's game over. You can cool it by dispatching multiple targets in quick succession, and every 500 points there's a bonus round where you can win extra ships.

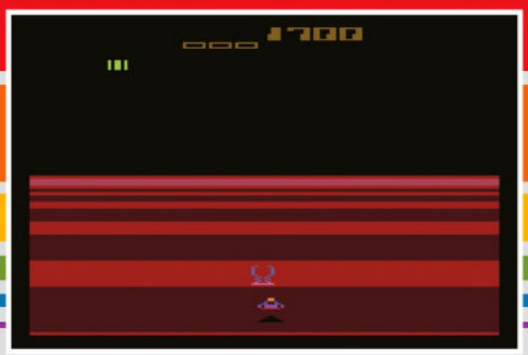
DENNIS' MEMORIES

"My creative impulses from back in that era are probably the aspect that I least remember. I know in one sense the games seem to have been emitted in a full-blown finished form. Of course that's not really the way things worked, there were a bunch of steps I went through. So I don't remember my specific motivation for coming up with the idea for *Solar Storm* or its creation, but I do remember that it was an evolving thing. I remember marketing was always thinking about the big numbers, they were saying where's the next *Demon Attack*, where can we get another *Atlantis*? So they liked *Solar Storm*."

NO ESCAPE!

INTELLIVISION • 1983

It wouldn't be accurate to call *No Escape!* a shoot-'em-up. There are Furies – ancient Greek goddesses that launch projectiles at you, and you can hurl stones back at them, but that causes them to multiply. Conversely, if you lob stones at the tiled ceiling of your prison then tiles dislodge and fall downwards, taking out any Furies in their path. Tiles can also take you out, however, so it's not without its risks. More so, because the best time to loosen ceiling tiles is when you're practically in the Furies' line of fire. Refraining from knocking down tiles needlessly is rewarded after each wave, at which point your score is added to based on how much ceiling is remaining. You face ten variations of Furies, which rather than just moving from side to side also home in on your position if you stand still for too long.



MOONSWEEPER

ATARI 2600, VARIOUS • 1983

For a third-person shooter, *Moonsweeper* has a lot of depth. While taking out hostile ships and solar flares in space you have to attempt to enter the orbit of a moon. If successful you have to rescue stranded miners while avoiding enemy fire, then once you meet your quota you need to fly through a series of portals in order to reach space and seek out new moons.

DENNIS' MEMORIES

Moonsweeper was Bob Smith again. I don't remember the genesis of that game, but Bob always had pretty original ideas for what he wanted to do. The people at Imagic that programmed the VCS got to the point where [they] had pretty solid technical backgrounds. They graduated from major universities and they typically had degrees in engineering. These people weren't game designers as a profession. They were mainly engineering types with a technical background. They were more akin to scientists in a sense, as opposed to creators or designers."

SHOOTIN' GALLERY

ATARI 2600 • 1983

Targets don't fire back in *Shootin' Gallery*, but there's no lack of challenge. You have limited shots, so you have to hit certain targets and achieve certain scores to reload, and those are reached more quickly by hitting targets in a certain order.

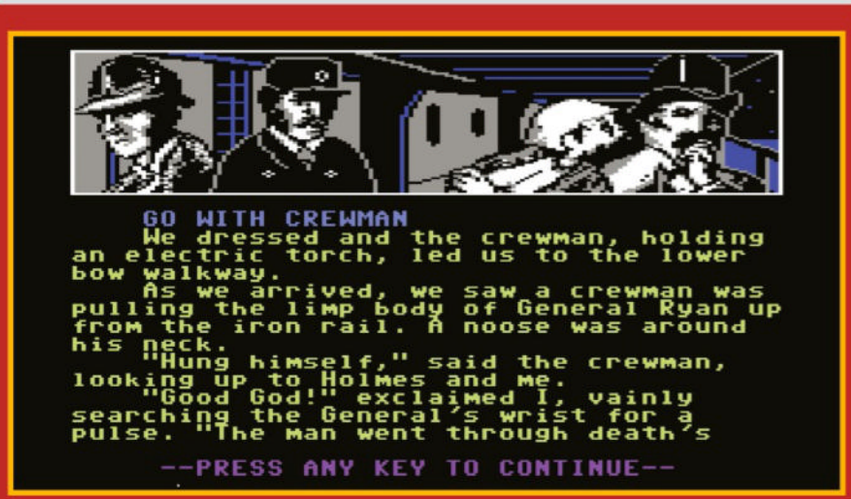
DENNIS' MEMORIES

I think *Shootin' Gallery* was the final product I did for Imagic. One of the things I remember most was that I was pleased with the artwork. I wanted it to be colourful and fun, and it was. I also thought the music complemented it really well. One of my main concerns was getting the music right. We first tried to find the right piece, and then we had to get the rights. The other thing was getting the marketing team interested in the product. I didn't feel that they were pushing that game, but in retrospect they were probably right. It just wasn't a wide appeal product. It was kind of a quirky title. It was also an era of increasingly bad news for the videogame business."

SUBTERRANEA

ATARI 2600 • 1983

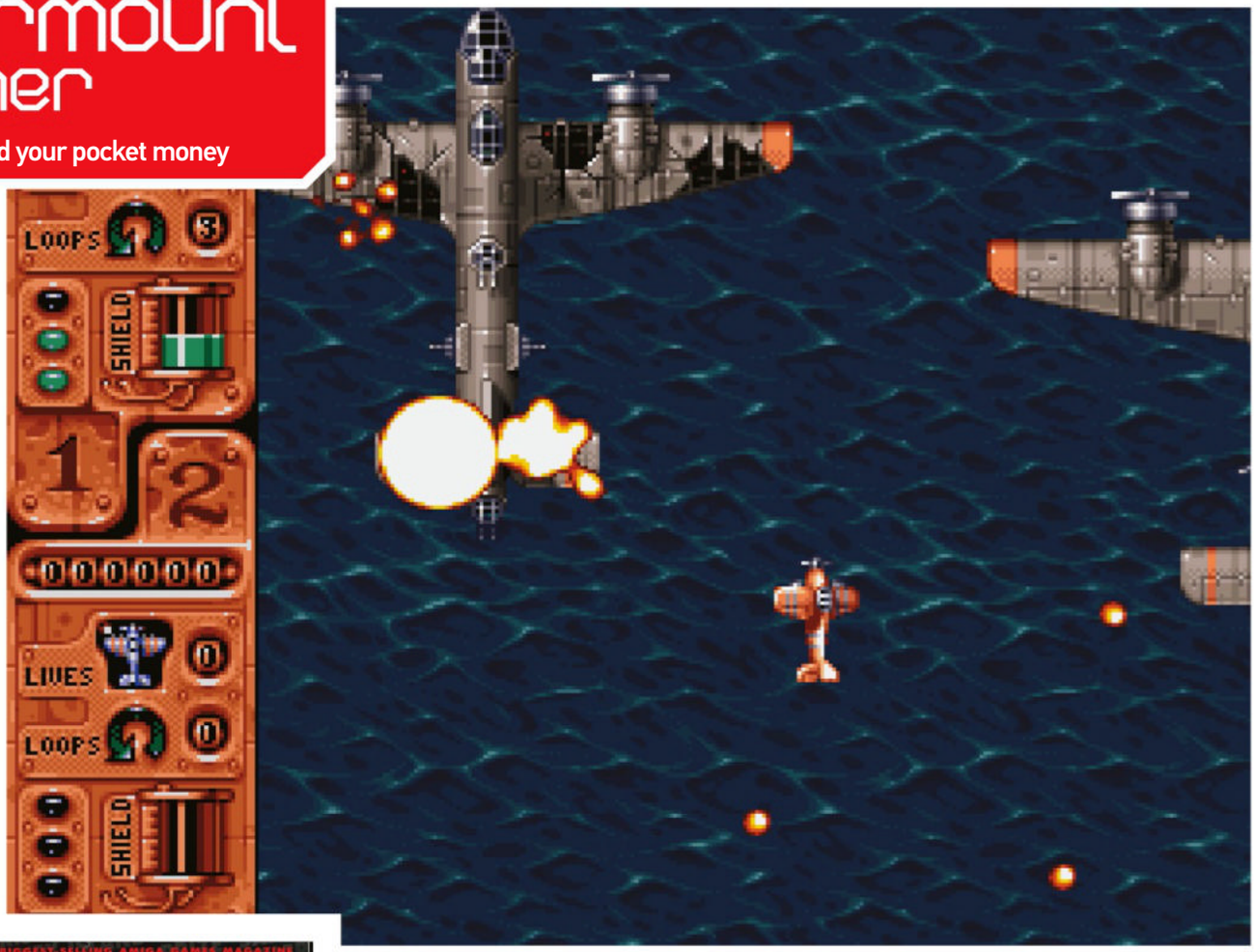
There's an element of *Defender* in *Subterranea*, but the other aspects of the game are quite original for the time. For starters, there's a boss fight. That's not unusual for a shooter, of course, but for a console game that was developed in 1983 it's pretty innovative stuff. Perhaps underlining the novelty of having a boss is that you face *Subterranea*'s Hexuplex at the start of each level rather than the end. Once you pick off the projectiles it spits at you a collectible crystal appears and then an exit to the main part of the stage. This involves side-scrolling firefights in a series of long corridors each with deadly skull-encrusted floors and ceilings. Once you clear one corridor of flying foes an exit takes you down to the next, until eventually you drop down to the lair of another Hexuplex. There's a nice variety of aerial opponents in the corridor challenges, and although they aren't armed they do destroy your ship on contact.


GO WITH CREWMAN
We dressed and the crewman, holding an electric torch, led us to the lower bow walkway.
As we arrived, we saw a crewman was pulling the limp body of General Ryan up from the iron rail. A noose was around his neck.
"Hung himself," said the crewman, looking up to Holmes and me.
"Good God!" exclaimed I, vainly searching the General's wrist for a pulse. "The man went through death's
--PRESS ANY KEY TO CONTINUE--

CONSOLE CRASH

HOW THE FALL OF ATARI TOOK IMAGIC WITH IT

After taking off like a rocket shortly after its formation, Imagic made moves to become a publicly owned company. Unfortunately, just days before this happened, Atari announced that sales of its 2600 console had slowed significantly, resulting in Imagic's IPO being delayed. It ultimately never happened, and rather than expanding as hoped, Imagic laid off staff as Atari's mounting financial losses and an oversaturated market led to an industry-wide crash in 1983. Imagic released its final few products in 1984. By 1986, the company had been written off, and the rights to its most popular releases had been sold.



» [Amiga] These early boss planes offer a glimpse of the variety in the full game.

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST-SELLING AMIGA GAMES MAGAZINE
AMIGA POWER
A MAGAZINE WITH ATTITUDE
THE ALL-TIME TOP 100
4 GAMES ON THIS DISK
THE BEST PD GAMES EVER!
It's back! Back! Back! We list the 100 best Amiga games ever! And this time we really, absolutely mean it.
Our game-by-game run-down starts on page 11
BANSHEE
ISSUE 37

AMIGA POWER #37

IRREVERENT AS AMIGA POWER WAS, IT WAS ALWAYS SERIOUS ABOUT GAMES AND ITS TOP 100 ISSUES SPARKED DEBATE AND CONTROVERSY IN EQUAL MEASURE. THIS TIME THOUGH, LUCKY READERS DIDN'T JUST GET TO READ ABOUT THE BEST TITLES, THEY GOT TO PLAY SOME OF THEM TOO

WORDS BY JAMES KONIK

THIS MONTH IN MAY 1994

The May issue of *Amiga Power* celebrated the Amiga's past, with an all-time top 100 featuring *Sensible Soccer* at the top. There was also a list of Dave Golder's top 25 Public Domain games with the top three included as freebies on the coverdisks.

Elsewhere in the mag, *Cannon Fodder* sat atop the game charts, and *Amiga Power* gleefully pointed out that CD32 games were outselling those of the Mega-CD. Talk of a new CD32 package sounded promising, but, as the next issue reported, Commodore US had already gone belly up. The end was in sight and for now, the Amiga's star was setting.

» [Amiga] There's a formidable range of firepower looking to knock you out of the sky.

THE MAIN EVENT: BANSHEE DEMO

Banshee was perhaps the best AGA exclusive released in the Amiga's lifespan. A Steampunk vertical shooter by Core Design, it's set in an alternate 1999, where the World Wars never happened and technology didn't get to the jet plane. Blardax Maldrear of the Styx Empire has taken over the world, and only Sven Svardensvart can stop him in his plane, the mighty Banshee.

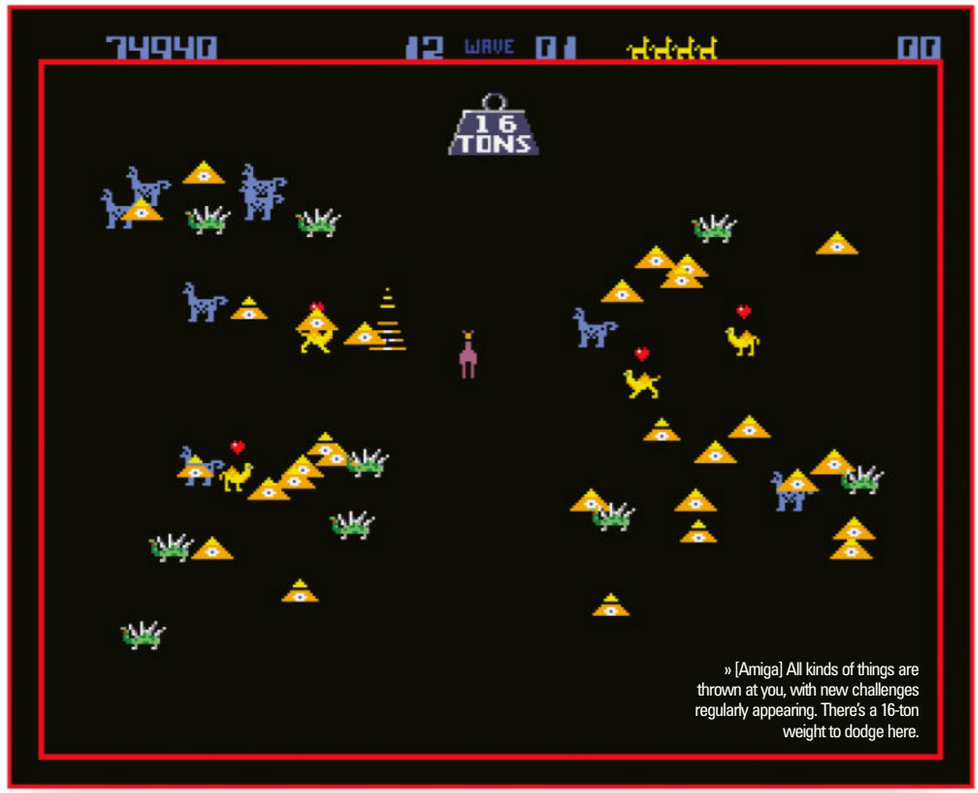
Coder Søren Hannibal took full advantage of the A1200's extra grunt to deliver bullet-strewn levels, packed with enemies and incidental detail. Enemy aircraft swoop, and gun-packed destroyers send anti-air exploding all around, with boats, choppers and soldiers all out to get you.

Right from the start, *Banshee* lays on the drama as drums rat-a-tat under the melody of Martin Iveson's spectacularly good music. Discordant and melancholy, the music continues in-game and lends the demo a sombre feel, but was swapped for a more conventional intro track and sound effects in the full game, lending a very different character.

There's a lot to dodge. It's as close to bullet hell as the Amiga gets, though a health bar helps even the odds, and you can escape sticky situations with a nifty loop the loop that buys a few seconds respite. The variety of power-ups can be flipped by shooting them, though it's hard to do under pressure as bullets go whizzing past your plane.

» [Amiga] You can take a few hits, but when you finally go, you go out with a bang.

» [Amiga] Power-ups in co-op are colour-coded, making fights less likely.



» [Amiga] All kinds of things are thrown at you, with new challenges regularly appearing. There's a 16-ton weight to dodge here.

Spectacularly good in co-op, with slick graphics and lavish attention to detail, *Banshee* is a top quality shooter. The demo offers a chunk of the unusually long first level. It's easy to beat, but leaves you wanting more. Cam Winstanley gave *Banshee* 89% in *Amiga Power* #39, calling it, "A barnstorming powerhouse of a blast-'em-up."

PLAY THIS NEXT: LLAMATRON: 2112

There's nothing like a Jeff Minter game in full flight, and Llamasoft's *Llamatron* is *Robotron* with all the dials turned up to max. A rare Amiga twin-stick shooter, if you have two joysticks plugged in, you play humanity's extremely furry secret weapon, a laser-spitting llama. Player two can bring a camel.

There are power-ups, beasties to save and cybernetic grunts to slaughter as you desperately fend off the Zzyaxian hordes. Gameplay evolves from level to level, the varied enemies constantly setting new challenges. *Llamatron*'s intense visuals and crazed soundscape amuse as they assault your senses. Lasers flash. Ungulates grunt. It's as brutal as it is majestic.

» [Amiga] The brains are deadly, the goats friendly, but those cherries look decidedly suspicious.

Covermount HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST OF THE REST

ADVANCED LAWNMOWER SIMULATOR

■ Kieron Gillen's Team 4 1/2 delivered this Amiga update of the classic *Your Sinclair* April Fools prank. The original, by the late Duncan MacDonald, originally reviewed as a 9/10 Megagame in the mag. Mow the lawn to earn cheese sandwiches. It's cutting-edge stuff.

ASTEROIDS

■ Kris Schulte's near-perfect take on Atari's arcade classic gets everything right, from the pew pew of your bullets, to the infuriating bonus ships, to the increasing tension as the background heartbeats intensify. Deservedly *Amiga Power*'s favourite public domain game.

DEFENDER

■ The month's second Eugene Jarvis-inspired game is this *Defender* conversion by Acid Software, using Blitz Basic 2. A tad more forgiving than the original arcade masterpiece, it's a fantastic game to own, and was 31st in the top 100.

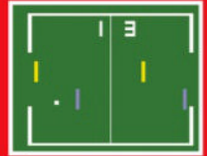
MONACO

■ This *Monaco GP* arcade conversion by Boys In Beige is a straight charge up the screen, dodging and weaving past F1 cars. There's little time to react, and it's even tougher at night with just your headlights to light the way.

SOKO BAN

■ Reader John Hardie produced this excellent *Sokoban* clone with a cute character and 70 fast-paced levels. The handy password system makes it easier to play through, but some iffy language saw words exchanged on the letters page a couple of issues later.

PONG



■ This solid *Pong* clone by Italian coder and musician Claudio Burgalio does all you'd expect and more, with multiple game modes and custom colours. *Amiga Power* put it at number 99 in their chart. It's a good bit of sofa competition.

THE MAKING OF Overboard!

OVERLOOKED GEM IS AN OVERUSED TERM THESE DAYS, BUT THE UNIQUELY BRILLIANT OVERBOARD! FROM PSYGNOSIS REALLY MERITS IT. WE PARLEY WITH DESIGNER NICK HARPER AND LEAD PROGRAMMER ROBERT DIBLEY TO DISCOVER THE STORY BEHIND THE SEAFARING SHOOTER THAT LARGELY SAILED UNDER THE RADAR

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

IN THE KNOW

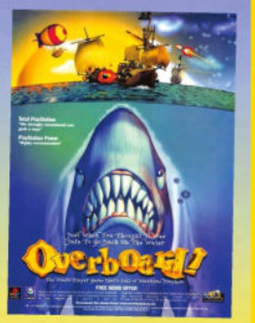
- **PUBLISHER:** PSYGNOSIS
- **DEVELOPER:** PSYGNOSIS
- **PLATFORM:** PLAYSTATION, PC
- **RELEASED:** 1997
- **GENRE:** ARCADE ADVENTURE

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BRATACCAS
PLATFORM: AMIGA, ATARI ST, MAC
RELEASED: 1986

WIPEOUT (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PC, PLAYSTATION, SATURN
RELEASED: 1995

COLONY WARS
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION
RELEASED: 1997



» The game's advertising featured an amusing take on the famous *Jaws* movie poster.

» The game was released in the US as *Shipwreckers!* due to a trademark issue with the *Overboard!* name.

■ Nick Harper was the designer of *Overboard!* These days he heads up Lively Studio in Leamington Spa.

» [PlayStation] You begin the game armed only with a single front cannon and your broadsides.

» [PlayStation] *Overboard!* exhibits some platformer qualities. You could be playing *Crash Bandicoot* here.

■ Lead programmer Robert Dibley currently works for game developer Double Eleven.

» [PlayStation] Taking over a town and replacing its flag with a Jolly Roger acts as a handy save point.

The run up to Christmas 1997 was a defining time for PlayStation gamers. The release schedule featured the usual annual sports updates – your *FIFA*, *NBA* and *F1* games – and sequelitis was starting to set in, with *Crash Bandicoot 2*, *Tomb Raider II* and *Broken Sword II* all vying for attention. But there were still plenty of fresh original titles to enjoy, including *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*, *Kurushi*, *PaRappa The Rapper* and *Grand Theft Auto*. Also fitting that bill was *Overboard!* (known as *Shipwreckers!* in the US), a unique offering that mixed seafaring, shooting and puzzling into one rollicking high seas adventure.

Psygnosis first previewed the game at the E3 show in June 1997. Despite the developer bringing a barrowload of new games to the expo, including *Colony Wars*, *G-Police* and *Discworld II*, many commentators singled out *Overboard!* for special mention. Speaking to the *Official UK PlayStation Magazine* after the expo, the game's producer Alan Bunker reflected on its successful showing. "The classic gameplay elements are certainly reasons why it had a good impact at E3," he said. "But one of the most frequent comments I heard was how original the game is. *Overboard!* has this bright, cheery and unusual look which is in complete contrast to the majority of other games in development – they're either dark and futuristic, or third-person platform games. Games players do want something different in a market that is fast becoming stale and dull."

The crew responsible for this breath of fresh, albeit slightly salty air was assembled at Psygnosis' Liverpool HQ in the spring of 1996. "When I joined Psygnosis it was to drive the design for *Overboard!*," says Nick Harper, who arrived from Future Publishing where he was production editor on *Edge* magazine. "But the game was already in development. The original concept was devised by Martin Calvert, who was the lead artist on the project. Martin had quite an ambitious idea about pirate ships pulling up against each other and the crews boarding and fighting and so on. The game was called *Broadsides* at this point. I'd say Martin's idea was ahead of its time really – you see that sort of stuff in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. But we were developing on the original PlayStation and it became apparent the technology wasn't going to be able to deliver that."

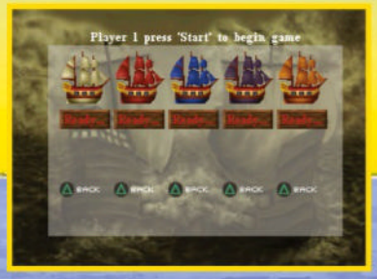
MARITIME MULTIPLAYER

THE STORY BEHIND THE FIVE-PLAYER 'BATTLES OF THE BRINE'

In addition to the game's 20-stage single-player game, *Overboard!* features a separate multiplayer mode which invites two-to-five players to battle it out across ten specially designed arenas. This timed deathmatch mode was singled out for special praise in several reviews, but designer Nick Harper reveals that it wasn't part of the original plan and was included following a late request from the platform holder.

He says, "About two months before we were supposed to go to the gold master, producer Alan came in and told us the executives wanted a multiplayer game because Sony wanted something for the new Multitap peripheral that let four players play together. We knew performance was going to be a real problem so we couldn't have a complex arena, which is why it was kept so simple. And then we pulled the camera around to fit the gameplay and tweaked it in a rush. It actually turned out pretty great considering the time we had to make it work."

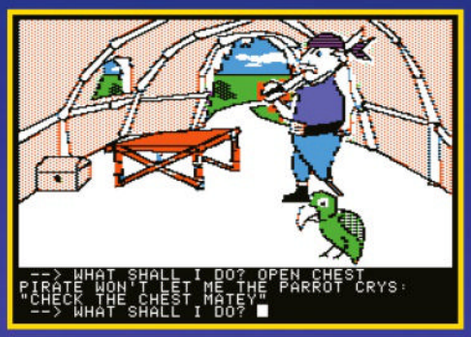
» [PlayStation] Nick reveals that the popular multiplayer mode was added late in the day.



"I WANTED THE GAME TO FEEL FUN BUT ALSO TO MAKE PLAYERS LAUGH"
NICK HARPER

A PIRATE'S LIFE FOR ME

THE BEST PIRATE-THEMED GAMES BBF (BEFORE BLACK FLAG)



Pirate Adventure

1978

■ The second in Scott Adams' series of text adventure games, *Pirate Adventure* sends players on another treasure hunt – but not just any old treasure, no, we're talking Long John Silver's lost treasure. But how do you transport yourself to the island? Say "Yo-ho" of course.

Sid Meier's Pirates!

1987

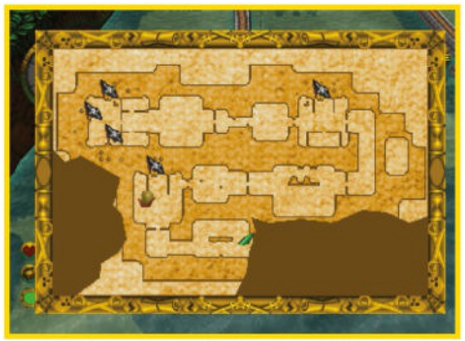
■ Created by strategy master Sid Meier and published by MicroProse, this open seas epic originated on the Commodore 64 where it's widely regarded as one of the machine's very best games. You don't have to play the game as a pirate, but of course we all did.

Skull & Crossbones

1989

■ Wily pirates One Eye and Red Dog team up to battle baddies, find booty and rescue maidens in Atari's coin-op swashbuckler. It's a good old-fashioned brawler that's enlivened by some brilliant 2D character art and animation. The less said about the home versions the better.

» [PlayStation] Man overboard! Rescuing the crew from enemy vessels boosts the energy of your own ship.



» [PlayStation] Each level has a map which outlines the waterways – and reveals hidden areas to explore.

▶ Aside from the technology gap, Nick's own gaming predilections had an influence on the new direction. "I think it was more my nature to make a game with an arcadey feel, so that's how it happened. I wanted the game to feel fun but also to make players laugh. We had a discussion about having aerial attacks so we came up with this idea of a parrot that would drop egg bombs on your ship. To counter that you had a firework-type missile you could shoot into the air, and when you hit the parrot it turned into a cooked bird and plummeted into the water. Similarly, if you set other ships on fire the crew would leap into the water and you could pick them up for health. You'd hear their comedic cries for help as they waved for assistance, provided by the great Stuart Duffield in audio."

> "I WAS A BIG FAN OF THE LEGEND OF ZELDA GAMES SO SOME OF THE PUZZLES CAME FROM THAT"
> **NICK HARPER**

***Overboard!* was lead programmer Robert Dibley's third title, following a couple of Atari Jaguar games.**

"Psygnosis already had a great deal of the technology working," he says, "so my job was more about adding new features to the existing engine, and improving performance, rather than the 'ground up' work I had been doing before." He recalls that the arcade-style approach was a good fit for the PlayStation hardware. "One of the reasons it felt so arcadey was probably the viewpoint," he says, "which was chosen for performance, as the downward-looking view reduced the amount of the play area that could be on the screen at any one time. Rendering on the PlayStation was quite limited. There was no depth buffer, so we had to draw layers from back to front to ensure everything was correctly obscured by items in front of it. The fixed angle viewpoint also allowed us to ignore many of the more complex issues that arise with displaying water, and just focus on simple effects such as ripples and foam. We did spend quite a bit of time adjusting the way the depth of water affected the colour, and rendering it all did cost a lot, but it was definitely worth it." Robert also remembers that gameplay ideas came from multiple sources. "The game design was a real team effort, with input from many of the team. The primary desire of the whole team was to make it fun."

Nick confirms that the design was collaborative – and not exactly structured. "Honestly, we mostly made it up as we went along," he says, smiling. "We decided to divide the games into various worlds, so that was planned out. Then it was a case of making sure we had enough content and puzzles. I was a big fan of *The Legend Of Zelda* games so some of the puzzles came from that, but a lot of it was just ideas that me or the team thought up on the spot and if we liked it we went for it. Alan Bunker was the producer and, bless him, he was very good at taking our latest idea and working out how we could make it fit. Back in those days we didn't really work in an agile manner, or have a true plan. It was very chaotic. In my head I had imagined how it would play, but I wasn't particularly good at communicating that. So the process was mostly to make a bit of the game, play it, keep what we liked, come up with something new that we thought would make it better, ask Alan if we could have it, and hope he worked out a way to make it into the game. Robert was quite open to trying new ideas. I was young and naive and just figured that was how things worked. This did lead to us working until 4am

The Secret Of Monkey Island
1990

■ Ron Gilbert's SCUMM-powered graphic adventure is surely the finest pirate puzzler ever created (and we're including the sequels there). Grab a Grog and enjoy pretend pirate Guybrush Threepwood's efforts to rescue love interest Elaine from the evil LeChuck.

Skies Of Arcadia
2000

■ Although it's a traditional RPG in many ways, *Skies Of Arcadia* provides a huge world map for you to explore, which you 'sail' in your airship. Featuring a fantastic story and a cast of larger-than-life characters, this is easily one of the best games available for the Dreamcast.

Lego Pirates Of The Caribbean
2011

■ Covering the first four films in the series, this is another delightful *Lego* game from Traveller's Tales. Who cares if the template is well-worn when it's as much fun as this? It's leagues ahead of all the dedicated *Pirates Of The Caribbean* videogame tie-ins.

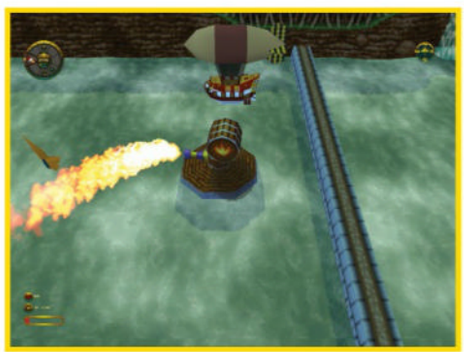
in the morning for about three months straight, but we were young and excited and just wanted to make something cool."

Although the team was young, it did include some 'old deckhands' from the 8-bit days, like David Jones, Neil Coxhead and the aforementioned Martin Calvert. The experience they brought to the project was vital, claim the pair. "As I mentioned, *Overboard!* was Martin's original idea," says Nick. "David Jones was a bit of a legend for some of us, as we knew him from the *Magic Knight* games. I remember one night at about 3am Dave rocking to *Firestarter* by the Prodigy as we were trying to keep our energy up to get the latest fixes in. It was incredible fun working on the game with this small team – about 15 of us in total. But it was also challenging and there were a lot of clashes, too. But nevertheless there was a lot of camaraderie in the team and I think that's what got everyone through to the end."

"We couldn't have made the game without them," adds Robert, "or indeed anyone else on the team. During the early development the timeline was cut by six months and it was only because everyone gave their all, and were willing to discuss what could be removed from the game in order to make it possible to complete in time, that we were able to ship it." The advancing deadline forced the team to get creative. "We had to come up with a custom method for generating the levels," continues Robert, "as we needed to be able to quickly generate new ones without having to build the whole thing from scratch each time. I developed a system using connecting tiles, where the editor would analyse the outer edges of each tile to determine which others could be matched up alongside it. This

» [PlayStation] Secret areas hide special goodies, like this 1UP which will come in very handy later on.

» [PC] If your ship happens to catch fire you can extinguish the flames using a handy waterfall.



» [PC] Limited-time power-ups can be found, like the blimp which lets you fly over obstacles.

DAVY JONES' LOCKER

MAGIC KNIGHT'S CREATOR TALKS OVERBOARD!

As mentioned in the main feature, *Magic Knight* series creator David Jones was one of the programmers on *Overboard!* "I enjoyed working on that game, it was a fun project," he says, when we share Nick's memories of him cranking up the Prodigy at an ungodly hour to motivate the team. "Back then it wasn't unusual for us to work rather late."

He also recalls one memorable design element he contributed. "I came up with the idea of having a wooden UFO appear if the user leaves the controller alone for a while without pausing the game. It beams up crew members and reduces the health of the ship. When I suggested it, I was told it's not in the schedule so we don't have time for it, but one of the artists was happy to make a wooden UFO model for me so it went in anyway. Programmers just shoving extra unapproved content into games tends to be frowned upon these days, but I thought it was funny so I did it. It got a positive mention in one of the reviews we had for the game." He does have one regret, however. "I wrote the enemy ship AI, but I realised afterwards that I'd not done it particularly efficiently. I corrected that for *Overboard 2*, but sadly that only lasted a month or two in development before being canned…" An abandoned sequel? That sounds like a tale for another time.

So does the man behind *Finders Keepers* and *Spellbound* prefer working alone, or within teams? "It depends a lot on the team!" he laughs. "Currently I'm working on my own project – the next *Magic Knight* game – and I'm enjoying that a lot. One advantage of working alone is I get full creative control."

» [PlayStation] Alien abduction. David contributed this B-movie-style UFO to the game's design.

» [PC] To move to the next world you must defeat a deadly boss, like this jumbo-sized lobster.

» [PC] This fire-breathing dragon boss is about to put us at the bottom of the ocean.

allowed us to generate levels in a fraction of the time, and at the same time because they were based on a square tile, it immediately solved the draw order problem, because when you look at a square grid there is a 100% guaranteed order that will start at the back and finish at the front." Nick remembers that performance was a particular issue. "Framerate was always a problem. I remember the artists had to revisit some of the assets to reduce the polygon count."

***Overboard!* was an original concept that was difficult to pigeonhole, but neither contributor remembers any issues with getting the game approved.** "We had quarterly reviews with the higher-ups," reveals Nick. "We had occasional visits from the production management teams to make sure the project was staying on track and we had regular visits from the marketing team to understand the game better, so they could strategise about how to sell it. Psygnosis was quite laissez-faire about things and there was a real trust between the management and the teams, so we were left to get on with it." Robert concurs. "I don't recall there being any difficulty with approvals at all. It was obvious once we got the first early version going that the game was addictive fun. Also, I don't think anyone has ever felt that pirates were a bad theme for a game."

The game's fun factor was clearly evident and it reviewed well in the gaming press following its October 1997 release. The *Official UK PlayStation Magazine* awarded it 8/10, saying, "*Overboard!* is a superb game, despite the fact that it's just a very clever, good-looking shoot-'em-up." It did call out the game's difficulty level on some of the later stages. "This is a game you have to work at, and it may well prove too hard for some." *PlayStation Power* also gave it 8/10, calling it "amazingly good fun" and "the most original game you'll find all year". It received 87% from *GamesMaster*, 75% from *Play* and 7/10 from *Edge*. Unsurprisingly, the mags struggled when

» [PC] Your little ship is no match for these lethal circular saws.

» [PC] Some of the sea creatures you encounter appear to have escaped from a Rare videogame.

suggesting alternatives to *Overboard!* The best they could come up with was *Return Fire*, *Loaded* and *Micro Machines V3*.

The following month the game arrived on the PC (this version was developed in parallel with the PlayStation game). Both versions were also released in the US – where it made sail under the name *Shipwreckers!* "The company wanted to call it *Overboard!*" reveals Nick. "But I think someone else owned the name in the US, so they needed to come up with a different name. I don't think we were that bothered – and to be honest a lot of the original team always wanted it to be called *Broadsides* – but unfortunately the poor artist who was making the introductory full-motion video sequence had to render everything twice, one sequence for each title. That took an age back then. Each frame took something like 30 minutes to render or something crazy."

> **"I DON'T THINK ANYONE HAS EVER FELT THAT PIRATES WERE A BAD THEME FOR A GAME"**
> **ROBERT DIBLEY**

The game didn't storm the sales charts, but Robert remembers Psygnosis was happy with the returns. "The team was informed that it had sold extremely well, and everyone got bonuses because of it – one of the few times when I got a significant bonus from a game. We didn't get actual sales numbers of course." But *Overboard!* remains a poignant title for both Robert and Nick, as in 1999, Sony began the process of consolidating Psygnosis into Sony Computer Entertainment. The Psygnosis name would disappear the following year and both would move on. "*Overboard!* was great to work on because of the team," says Robert. "There were lots of people from different backgrounds, with different ideas, and we just bounced ideas off each other, tried things out, and made them work. It wasn't a high-profile game launch, especially compared to *G-Police*, the other game which came out at the same time, but the two games shared a lot of technology, which helped the development of both. I really enjoyed my time working there, but of course it closed not long after."

"Psygnosis was an incredible company to work for," concludes Nick. "There was a sense of everyone pulling together to make something great. There was a lot of internal rivalry but in a good way – we all wanted our game to be the best, but not at the expense of the others. I felt that, both in my studio, but also across the company. We worked hard, often into the night and early morning, but everything was done with a joke and a smile. It was cool. It all ended too soon." ✱

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Dino Crisis

MORE SHOOTING, LESS HACKING

» PC » 2000 » CAPCOM PRODUCTION STUDIO 4

I was massively excited when Capcom announced *Dino Crisis*, its new action game from Shinji Mikami, the creator of *Resident Evil*. Despite that early anticipation, I never actually got around to playing *Dino Crisis* when it eventually arrived, due to it never appearing on Sega's Saturn.

I played it briefly around a friend's house, but it wasn't until the Dreamcast version came out that I finally got to play Mikami's game, and do you know what? I simply couldn't get on with it. There's no denying that it's a perfectly solid survival horror adventure, but for some reason I found myself really having to force my way through it.

I think the biggest issue for me was the lack of actual dinosaurs in it. Outside of the ever-present Velociraptors and the occasional appearance of a T-rex, very few other dinos feature in it. I found that disappointing and the general structure of the game was also rather annoying. I wasn't a fan of the many locked doors that featured in *Dino Crisis* and the way you had to use the DDK (Digital Disk Key) to bypass them. It really killed the pace of Mikami's game for me and it felt like I was doing more hacking than shooting.

I've since returned to the game via both GOG and Steam and while they have numerous quality-of-life features, I definitely prefer the second game (which is also available on both stores) to the first. *Dino Crisis* is clearly an interesting experiment and there are plenty of examples of Mikami's ability to create tense and thrilling action sequences as you play, but the hacking still feels fiddly.

The series would massively change direction for the sequel and it's a far better game as a result, with a lot more variety to its dinosaurs too. However, if you've far more patience than me, you're bound to have a good time with the original, even if it does only include a handful of dinos.

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO
- **DEVELOPER:** NINTENDO EAD
- **PLATFORM:** NINTENDO 64
- **RELEASED:** 1997
- **GENRE:** RAIL SHOOTER

ULTIMATE GUIDE LYLAT WARS

KNOWN AS STAR FOX 64 IN NORTH AMERICA AND JAPAN, LYLAT WARS REIMAGINED A BELOVED SNES GAME FOR THE 64-BIT ERA, ADDING CINEMATIC SPECTACLE, BRANCHING PATHS, FULL VOICE ACTING, AND FORCE FEEDBACK VIBRATION. AS NINTENDO REVIVES THE SERIES FOR ITS SWITCH 2, WE REVISIT THE NINTENDO 64 CLASSIC

WORDS BY JAMES TOCCHIO

» [Nintendo 64] The secret warp rings of Meteos pose a distinct challenge, but offer big rewards.

» [Nintendo 64] Someone call Luigi because we think we're seein' a ghost.

The Nineties were an astonishing decade for videogames, a time when innovation seemed to come not incrementally, but in bounds. The generational leap from 16-bit consoles to 32- and 64-bit 3D polygonal systems left us breathless as gameplay and graphics expanded into a whole new dimension. During this time, Nintendo fans had it especially good.

With games like *Super Mario 64*, *Wave Race 64*, *Mario Kart 64* and others, Nintendo successfully reimagined the best of its library into wholly new experiences on the Nintendo 64. In 1997, it refreshed another classic with *Lylat Wars*, a reboot of the pioneering SNES flight combat game *Starwing* (known as *Star Fox* outside PAL regions).

Lylat Wars took everything that made the original *Starwing* great and cranked the dial to 11 (or perhaps more appropriately to 64). The graphics were stunning, the worlds alive. The character models, ships and enemies carried a level of detail that we could only imagine in the SNES era. The game's galaxy felt vast and unpredictable, with branching paths and endless secrets. Wingmates shouted warnings and panicked over comms while enemies barked taunts mid-dogfight. The story was cinematic yet told with a deft lightness and restraint that made it all the more captivating. And then there was the Rumble Pak. A tiny, grey miracle that plugged into the N64 controller and made the thing shudder in your hands with every deflected shot and clipped wing. As so often happened with games in the Nineties, it felt as if you were holding the future in your hands. For those of us who grew up watching *Star Wars*, playing *Starwing* and wishing we could fly, nothing was as cool as *Lylat Wars*.

> "LYLAT WARS TOOK EVERYTHING THAT MADE THE ORIGINAL STARWING GREAT AND CRANKED THE DIAL TO ELEVEN (OR PERHAPS MORE APPROPRIATELY TO 64)"

Developed by Nintendo EAD, *Lylat Wars* was initially a labour of love. It began as an experimental side project by Takaya Imamura, who had previously designed *Starwing*'s characters, and programmer Kazuaki Morita, who had previously worked on the *Super Mario Bros* and *The Legend Of Zelda* series.

Morita was new to 3D programming, and the duo didn't have access to the final N64 hardware. Working instead on a large development computer with a prototype controller, they spent the first six months learning 3D, rebuilding elements of the original *Starwing*, creating boxes and Arwings in a 3D environment. In an interview published in the Japanese magazine *Nintendo Dream* in 2002, Imamura noted the scepticism of their bosses. "We weren't able to get anyone higher up to give the go-ahead," he said. "Until Space World, where we exhibited the N64 for the very first time."

REMAKING LYLAT WARS

PRETTY SMOOTH FLYING, FOX

■ In 2011, Nintendo commissioned Dylan Cuthbert's Q-Games to develop *Star Fox 64 3D*, a remake of *Lylat Wars* for the handheld Nintendo 3DS. Dylan, who previously worked on *Starwing* and *Star Fox 2* for the SNES, described the project as much more than a simple port. "*Star Fox 64 3D* was a great project," he told us. "I enjoyed being the director, and working with Imamura was a great experience. I hesitate to call it a port because we actually had to rework it a lot, remodelling and re-texturing the entire game in the process."

The finished game delivered a major visual overhaul, with sharper character models, more detailed environments, and cleaner graphics that made the action feel more dynamic than ever. It also capitalised on the 3DS hardware in smart ways. Players could choose to use the system's gyroscope for optional motion controls, and the game naturally supported autostereoscopic 3D throughout the whole adventure, giving extra depth and dimension (literally and figuratively) to the dogfights and auto-scrolling rail-shooter stages of the original.

The game's multiplayer also received special attention. Up to four players could battle using the 3DS' Download Play feature, with a real-time camera feed of opponents appearing on the system's lower screen.

BE KIND REWIND

THE SILLIEST PROMOTIONAL VHS TAPE OF ALL TIME

■ It's hard to overstate the impact of *Nintendo Power* on North American gamers. For more than two decades, its pages gave millions of readers the inside scoop on Nintendo. But it was more than a magazine. *Nintendo Power* sometimes shipped with posters, collector's cards, 3D glasses. If you were a subscriber to *Nintendo Power*, you ran to the mailbox every day feeling that something special might be waiting. From 1994 to 2000, Nintendo Power sent 12 VHS tapes to subscribers. These tapes commonly offered a behind-the-scenes look at upcoming games. 1997's *Star Fox 64* tape did something different.

It ditched the behind-the-scenes format of previous tapes and instead presented an absurd story of espionage in which two goons from Sega and Sony kidnap Nintendo's ace game tester Peter, and Nintendo's chief scientist Bob. The thugs motivate Peter and Bob to spill everything they know about Nintendo's next big game, *Star Fox 64*, by torturing a Mario doll. It's a ridiculous Nineties premise perfectly executed. *Nintendo Power* was playing it loud, indeed.

Space World was a videogame trade show hosted by Nintendo from 1989 to 2001 as a venue for the brand and its partners to announce and demo new consoles, accessories and games. During 1995's show, Nintendo publicly unveiled the newly named Nintendo 64 with a sizzle reel of 13 upcoming games. Nestled somewhere between *Super Mario 64*, *Mario Kart 64*, and the unnamed *Zelda 64* were ten seconds of the project that would become *Lylat Wars*. This was received well enough by the press and public that Imamura and Morita's pet project was greenlit.

> "LYLAT WARS REMAINS IMPRESSIVE BECAUSE BENEATH THE SHINY COAT OF PAINT IS A CHASSIS OF MECHANICAL PERFECTION"

Nintendo EAD assembled around the game, with the legendary Shigeru Miyamoto serving as producer, and Takao Shimizu acting as director. They quickly decided that their main goal with *Lylat Wars* would be to create a fully realised version of the previously developed *Starwing*, a game which the team felt was held back by the limitations of the 16-bit SNES. They also wanted to incorporate some of the best elements of the unreleased SNES sequel, *Star Fox 2* (such as the game's all-range dogfight segments).

The power of the 64-bit system allowed them to spread their metaphorical wings. The team expanded nearly every aspect of the original *Starwing*'s design. Framerates increased dramatically, levels became larger and more dynamic, enemy encounters more cinematic. The ships were faster, the action more intense, and the fully voice-acted characters were more expressive than ever. Nintendo also positioned *Lylat Wars* as a technological showcase for the Nintendo 64 itself. The game was packaged with the newly developed Rumble Pak, an accessory that added force feedback vibration to the console's controller.

Yet what truly elevated *Lylat Wars* and what has made it an enduring touchstone in Nintendo's catalogue is not its impressive technology (though it is impressive). Many games of its era which once dazzled us with their technical chops now feel cumbersome or dated. *Lylat Wars* remains impressive because beneath the shiny coat of paint is a chassis of mechanical perfection. *Lylat Wars* is one of Nintendo's greatest examples of pure game design.

From the very first moment of the game, as the Arwings scream across the placid surface of the seas of Corneria, you can feel that you're in for something special. Koji Kondo's dramatic score carries you into Corneria City, where Andross' evil forces are running amok. Your wingmates chatter in your ears, their distinct personalities overlapping through the

» [Nintendo 64] Cinematic cutscenes intercut the stages, taking clear inspiration from films like *Star Wars*.

» [Nintendo 64] Tertiary characters like Katt and Bill appear throughout the game to lend a hand.

» [Nintendo 64] The Blue Marine submarine presents a change of pace without overstaying its welcome.

» [Nintendo 64] All-range mode missions allow you to fly anywhere within a square arena.

A FOX TALE

FLYING THROUGH THREE DECADES OF STAR FOX GAMES

STARWING
1993 – SNES

■ *Starwing* (*Star Fox* outside PAL regions) was primarily developed by British studio Argonaut Games in collaboration with Nintendo EAD. The studio also designed the Super FX chip, which made *Starwing* possible, and which was the first 3D graphics accelerator ever released in a consumer product.

STAR FOX 2
2017 – SNES CLASSIC EDITION

■ Development on *Star Fox 2* was completed in 1995. The sequel incorporated several new mechanics, including elements of real-time strategy games. Fearing poor reception as the industry shifted to powerful 32-bit consoles, Nintendo shelved *Star Fox 2*. It wasn't released until 2017 on the SNES Classic Edition.

STAR FOX ADVENTURES
2002 – GAMECUBE

■ Developed by Rare and set eight years after the events of *Lylat Wars* (*Star Fox 64*), *Star Fox Adventures* was quite the departure for the series in that it was a third-person action adventure game more akin to *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* than any on-rails shooter. It began life on the N64 as *Dinosaur Planet*.

STAR FOX: ASSAULT
2005 – GAMECUBE

■ Developed by Namco and intended as a return to the series' shooter roots, *Star Fox Assault* lets players pilot Arwings, drive the Landmaster tank, or run-and-gun on foot (which are easily the weakest sections). The game resumes the *Star Fox* story one year after the dramatic events of *Star Fox Adventures*.

STAR FOX COMMAND
2006 – NINTENDO DS

■ The first handheld *Star Fox* game, *Command* was developed by Q-Games, the studio founded by former Argonaut programmer Dylan Cuthbert. Cuthbert, instrumental in creating the original *Starwing*, directed the game. *Star Fox Command* blends classic *Star Fox* combat with streamlined turn-based strategy elements.

STAR FOX 64 3D
2011 – NINTENDO 3DS

■ Following *Command*, Nintendo EAD and Q-Games again collaborated, this time to remake *Lylat Wars* (*Star Fox 64*) for the 3DS. Directed once again by Dylan Cuthbert, *Star Fox 64 3D* faithfully and meticulously recreated the original, adding 3D effects, updated graphics and new gameplay modes.

STAR FOX ZERO
2016 – NINTENDO WII U

■ Developed in partnership with Platinum Games, *Star Fox Zero* is a reimagining of *Lylat Wars* (*Star Fox 64*). It was controversial due to a unique and polarising motion-based control scheme in which players use the second screen of the Wii U gamepad to target and shoot enemies down.

STAR FOX GUARD
2016 – NINTENDO WII U

■ *Star Fox Guard* was a standalone game bundled with the original first print edition of *Star Fox Zero*. It's an interesting tower defence game in which players must utilise the Wii U gamepad's second screen to monitor various security cameras, activate weapons, and protect bases from oncoming attackers.

» [Nintendo 64] Yaru de Pon is a Tanuki who only appears in Training Mode, and is the only non-voice-acted character.

crackling comms. An enemy ship swoops into range, an explosion rocks the controller in your hand, and the battle is on.

***Ylat Wars* moves with purpose.** As with all the best rail shooters, its controls are immediate and intuitive in a way that many early 3D games struggled to achieve. Flight is precise and fluid in a way that was rare then and still feels amazing today. By the end of the game's first stage, you'll know everything you need to know about being an ace pilot. Braking, banking, boosting and barrel rolls are soon second nature.

The game's pacing is also extraordinarily thoughtful. New mechanics arrive unexpectedly and are then retired before even a hint of overfamiliarity. New flight modes, like the all-range mode evolved from *Star Fox 2*, create new dynamics. One stage feels like a dogfight, while another is more like tower defence. At times you're forced to abandon the Arwing, for example, to mount a land-based rescue mission in the Landmaster Tank while rumours of a deep-sea bioweapon send you beneath the waves in Slippy's Blue Marine submarine. Tertiary characters burst onto the scene mid-mission, revealing just enough of their backstories to keep us wanting more.

BOSS RUSH

I CAN'T BELIEVE I LOST TO THIS SCUM!

GRANGA'S MECH WALKER

LOCATION: CORNERIA (EASY)

Granga is one of Andross' trusted lieutenants, and the architect of the invasion of Fox's homeworld, Corneria.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

His giant mechanised war walker can be toppled with a few lasers to the leg. Strafe the powerpack on its back to end Granga and liberate Corneria.

METEO CRUSHER

LOCATION: METEO

The Meteo Crusher is an enormous industrial rock processor turned war machine, it's piloted by Andross' sneakiest lieutenant.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Avoid its electric blasts while shooting its glowing weak points. Don't relax when it seems like the fight's over.

STAR WOLF

LOCATION: FORTUNA

Star Wolf makes their first appearance at Fortuna, a captured Cornerian base that's been wired to blow.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot down all the enemy craft in this free-range battle, then down the four Star Wolf pilots before the bomb explodes. Success or failure will determine your next destination.

BACOON

LOCATION: AQUAS

Aquas' underwater bioweapon is an enormous clam that shoots pearls at Fox in the Blue Marine.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot the pillars connecting the shells and dodge projectiles. When the shell opens, shoot the giant mussel with lasers until the eye reveals itself for a missile.

ATTACK CARRIER

LOCATION: CORNERIA (HARD)

This boss appears at the end of the Hard Route through Corneria, accessed by flying under several arches throughout the level and by saving Falco.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

It launches missiles and attack ships from its launch bay. Destroy the launcher and the bay, then shoot the main carrier down.

SHOGUN WARLORD

LOCATION: SECTOR Y

In Sector Y, a Cornerian fleet is under attack by humanoid robots. At the end of the stage, you'll fight three.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

This all-range mode boss fight is tricky, since the Shogun Warlords are so nimble and lock-on attacks aren't very effective. Just keep flying and shooting.

SAUCERER

LOCATION: KATINA

Fox and company stop by Katina to help an old friend, Bill, with a flying saucer problem.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Engage with the saucer and its fighter craft in all-range mode, and take out the saucer's four hatches when they open to release fighters. Then, blow the core!

SPYBORG

LOCATION: SECTOR X

Spyborg is a secret weapon developed and abandoned by Andross. It roams Sector X, a twisted and confused artificial intelligence, seeking its creator.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Avoid its dangerous arms and shoot its head to reveal a second, smaller head. (Shoot that, too.)

It's also a game dense with replayability. Mysterious planets on the galaxy map hint at undiscovered routes and multiple branching paths. Failing or achieving certain objectives unlocks real-time reactions and dynamic changes in how the game plays out. There are over 20 different possible paths through the game, and the true ending can only be accessed by taking the hardest route.

Lylat Wars was a success for Nintendo. It sold over 4 million copies worldwide and became the Nintendo 64's ninth best-selling game of all time. It fared well critically, too, with *Edge* magazine rating it 9/10 and the North American magazine *GamePro* awarding it a perfect 5/5. The Nintendo 3DS remake from 2011 was similarly well received, and a modern remake for the Switch 2, titled simply *Star Fox*, is set to revive the franchise after a period of dormancy.

"IN 1997 NINTENDO'S GAME FELT LIKE THE FUTURE, AND TODAY IT FEELS JUST AS FRESH"

Whatever the future holds for Fox and his comrades, *Lylat Wars* will always remain a high watermark for Nintendo 64 fans. It's fast, cinematic, endlessly replayable, and confident in its design. In 1997 Nintendo's game felt like the future, and today it feels just as fresh. ✱

VULCAIN

LOCATION: SOLAR

■ Beneath the molten waves of the planet Solar lurks a hideous bioweapon, and Fox's greatest challenge yet.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot the arms while avoiding tidal waves of lava. Shoot the rocks that it throws to replenish your continually dwindling shields, then focus fire on its head.

GORAS

LOCATION: TITANIA

■ When an overzealous Slippy crash-lands on Titania, Star Fox encounters a prehistoric monster. For this battle, you'll be driving the Landmaster Tank.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot the limbs to free Slippy, then avoid its tail swipes and punches by hovering. Once the chest opens, shoot the heart.

GORGON

LOCATION: AREA 6

■ As Star Fox approaches Venom, they pass through Area 6, Andross' last line of defence. There they find Gorgon, a planet-crushing space station.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot its tentacles to open the shell, then shoot the energy balls to weaken it. Finally, focus fire on the central core.

ZONESS SARUMARINE

LOCATION: ZONESS

■ A deadly submarine bursts from the toxic waves of the ocean world Zoness. Its massive cannons, salvage crane, and ball and chain make it a formidable foe.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Shoot its exhaust ports with bombs, then its cannons, then the crane. Finally, send the cabin to the briny depths.

MECHBETH

LOCATION: MACBETH

■ The Mechbeth is an advanced combat system tethered to Andross' Forever Train.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

The easiest way to destroy it, and end Andross' weapons production capability, is to shoot the railway switches throughout the level, forcing the train and Mechbeth to crash into the weapons factory.

ANDROSS

LOCATION: VENOM

■ Andross can only truly be destroyed by taking the hard road to Venom.

HOW TO BEAT THEM

You have to destroy not only Andross' giant hands and floating face, but the evil ape's eyes and brain as well. Fox may even see his long lost father one last time…

A CLASSIC REIMAGINED

FOX'S GREATEST ADVENTURE HEADS TO SWITCH

■ If you needed further proof of *Lylat Wars*' brilliance, just consider how many times Nintendo has revisited it. The game has recently received another new makeover, this time for Nintendo's Switch 2. Simply known as *Star Fox*, it's being touted as a reboot of the series, with the new, more realistic-looking heroes receiving a mixed reception online.

The game itself is business as usual, sticking to the on-rail dynamics of the earlier games but expanding the original title in a number of ways, including its story, level design and game mechanics. Multiplayer is also improved over the earlier versions of the game. You can find out more about Nintendo's reboot by reading our review in issue 288.

» [Switch 2] We're not sure how we feel about the new look for Fox McCloud and his friends.

MIRROR'S EDGE™

CAPITALISING ON THE PARKOUR CRAZE OF THE MID-NOUGHTIES, MIRROR'S EDGE COMBINED BALLETIC FREE-RUNNING MECHANICS WITH AN IMMERSIVE FIRST-PERSON POINT OF VIEW. REMEMBERED TODAY FOR ITS INNOVATIVE GAMEPLAY AND BOLD CONCEPT, THE GAME'S DYNAMIC TECHNO SOUNDTRACK BY SOLAR FIELDS HAS SINCE EARNED LEGENDARY STATUS IN THE ERA OF SEVENTH-GEN CONSOLES

WORDS BY LIAM HEITMANN-RYCE-LEMERCIER

» [PC] Magnus' early attempts to translate light, space and tension greatly refined the eventual sound of *Mirror's Edge*.

IN THE KNOW

- **» DEVELOPER:** DICE
- **» COMPOSER:** MAGNUS BIRGERSSON (UNDER ARTIST NAME SOLAR FIELDS)
- **» BEST TRACK:** KATE
- **» RELEASE:** 2008
- **» PLATFORM:** PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360, PC
- **» GENRE:** ACTION/ADVENTURE

■ Swedish composer Magnus Birgersson, better known as Solar Fields, has composed only two videogame soundtracks: *Mirror's Edge* in 2008, and its 2016 sequel *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*. He continues releasing music today and lives in Gothenburg.

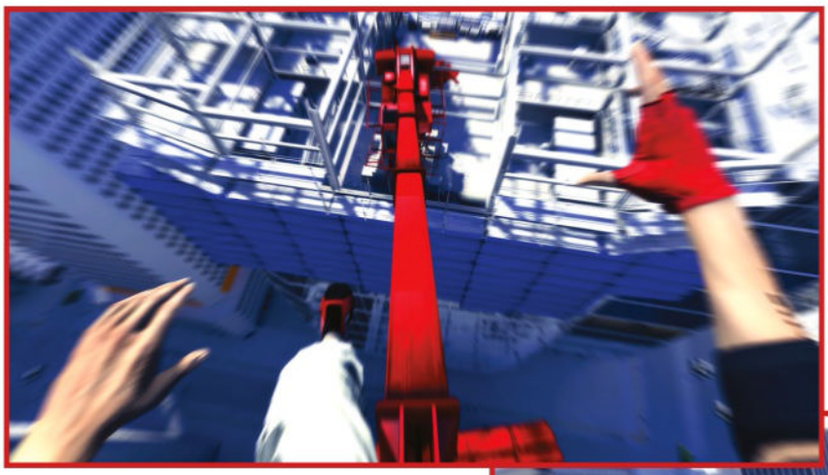
Set within the confines of a fascist regime in the near future, where all communications are federally monitored, *Mirror's Edge* offers a novel reimagining of the free-running trend that was dominating pop culture in the mid-Noughties. Think the rooftop chase in *The Bourne Ultimatum* or the free-runner pursuit at the start of *Casino Royale*, and that's the mood we're going for.

In a sensational first-person perspective, you are put in the shoes of Faith, a Runner who has to deliver top-secret messages and avoid detection. What follows is a pulse-racing action adventure propelled by an equally breathless techno soundtrack from Swedish composer Magnus Birgersson, credited in the game under his Solar Fields moniker.

In approaching the sounds he wanted, Magnus took inspiration from the game's stark, minimalist design. "The visual world of *Mirror's Edge* is dominated by white surfaces with bold accents of colour. There's very little visual noise, which creates a strong sense of openness and clarity."

Importantly, this lack of in-between shades did not translate into writing minimalistic music. Instead, Magnus used the environment as a framework in which contrast became the primary component. While the setting may feel static, "Faith is constantly in movement, and that tension between stillness and movement became a central idea in how I approached the soundtrack. I often think in colours when I compose, and the environment's sharp reds, blues, and whites suggested something very defined."

The driving element behind Magnus' process was answering the question of how sound could harmonise within such a rigid architectural base. Marcus took an analytical approach to the level design, observing the many open gaps and vertical lines between buildings as, "Clean surfaces that almost behave like silence between musical elements. Silence – or, rather, controlled emptiness –



» [PC] There's an ethereal quality to the *Mirror's Edge* soundtrack which contracts nicely against its stark visuals.

» [PC] You're better off running past opponents, but Faith can handle herself when she needs to.

» [PC] Even today, *Mirror's Edge* stands apart from the many first-person shooters that flood the market.

became just as important as sound. It allowed the music to breathe inside the environment, rather than constantly filling it."

This notion of breathing, of a natural, dynamic cycle, is further complemented by Magnus' preference to build his tracks in layers and assembled textures. What may begin as a simple thread of sound can soon weave between other pulses of movement and atmospheric shifts, until it assembles into a dense sonic fabric. "That way of working," he says, "naturally aligned with the game's structure, where the player is always moving through spaces that feel clean and open, but never empty."

Magnus was first brought onto the project by Magnus Walterstad, the audio director of DICE, a Swedish game developer that became a subsidiary of Electronic Arts in 2006. Walterstad had liked Magnus' work as Solar Fields and had initially reached out to confirm he was actually the composer behind the stage name.

"I was sent a few pieces of concept art with no explanation at all," Magnus remembers. "No story, no gameplay, no context. The idea was simply to see what I 'heard' when looking at the images. I remember finding that approach both unusual and inspiring, as it allowed me to respond purely on instinct."

Magnus' initial sketches attempted to translate light, space and tension into sound. A daunting task, it was ultimately this method of tapping into pure emotional response to the game's preproduction concept art that laid the foundation for the entire soundtrack. "Later on," he reflects, "I found out that this initial interpretation played a big role in them deciding to bring me onto the project." Notably, the two *Mirror's Edge* titles that Magnus worked on are the only videogame soundtracks he has produced. There are a number of reasons for this, ranging from practical to personal, and a lot of it stems from the compartmentalised way in which Magnus works as a composer. "Projects like this demand complete focus over a long period of time, and when I take on something like this, I go all in. I don't work on my own releases at the same time, and I don't do concerts either. I'm 100% dedicated to the project for as long as it takes."

This approach is the only way for Magnus to fully connect with the sonic world he is creating, and there is also the requirement for creative freedom and genuine interest. "If that connection isn't there," he says, "I would rather say no than force something that doesn't feel genuine to me."

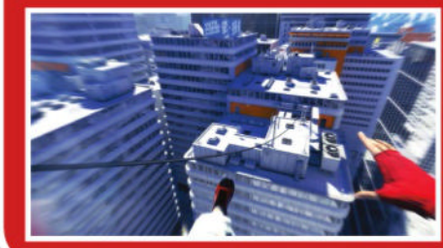
Looking back now, almost 20 years later, Magnus fondly regards *Mirror's Edge* as a unique alignment of sound and movement that doesn't happen very often. It is also a musical project that people continue to talk about as though it were released yesterday. "I still hear from listeners who discovered my music through the game," he says proudly, "and many of them have stayed with my work ever since." Magnus remains flexible in his artistic persona, however, and has never been concerned in being defined by one project over another. "*Mirror's Edge* has its place, and I respect what it became, but I also value the independence and freedom I have in my own releases. Both sides feed into each other in different ways, and I think that balance is important for me to keep evolving."

ZIP IT!

How Magnus nailed the sound of the zip line

As Magnus tells us, "The zip line sound was surprisingly difficult to get right." The game's sound team experimented with a variety of props, including, "Jacket zippers, sleeping bags, tents, fishing reel mechanisms and rope movements; nothing really matched the feeling they were after."

In the end, the final sound heard in the game was found in a decidedly unathletic prop. Magnus remembers that a pair of office slippers were lying around the studio of DICE sound designer Magnus Walterstad. "The sound that made it into the game came from the back edge of the slippers being dragged across the rippled carpet in Magnus' studio. Sometimes, what you need is already right in front of you."



THE MAKING OF toy COMMANDER

» [Dreamcast] Huggy Bear makes for a fierce final challenge if you don't defeat his boss toys first.

» [Dreamcast] The playfulness of army-themed toys is reinforced given that your missiles and bombs are also pencils and erasers.

PLANNED AS AN EARLY RELEASE FOR SEGA'S INCOMING DREAMCAST, TOY COMMANDER WAS THE FIRST GAME BY THE SHORT-LIVED NO CLICHÉ. FOUNDER FRÉDÉRICK RAYNAL EXPLAINS THE CHALLENGES OF CREATING ONE OF THE DREAMCAST'S VERY FIRST PAL LAUNCH GAMES

WORDS BY ALAN WEN

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** SEGA
- **DEVELOPER:** NO CLICHÉ
- **PLATFORM:** DREAMCAST
- **RELEASED:** 1999
- **GENRE:** ACTION

The Dreamcast was a short but bright period of ingenuity and innovation for Sega, when the Japanese company took its biggest and final swing in the console wars following the disaster of the Saturn. Of course, while that comeback started with the console's launch in Japan in 1998, its fightback would also need support from Western developers when the Dreamcast launched in North America and Europe the following year. Among its considerably substantial European launch line-up in October 1999, including original exclusives like *Ready 2 Rumble Boxing* and *TrickStyle*, was *Toy Commander*, a release made by one of Sega's first European developers, No Cliché.

This France-based studio was founded by Frédérick Raynal, best known for pioneering 3D survival horror *Alone In The Dark*, but whose subsequent studio Adeline Software International (which created *Little Big Adventure* and *Time Commando*) was being put up for sale by its French owner Delphine Software International. It just so happened that Sega was also shopping around for a studio. "It was strange because they spent maybe half an hour and then left," Frédérick recalls. "Then the next week they called Paul [de Senneville, owner of Delphine] to say, 'We want the studio but we don't want the games.'" Essentially, the team at Adeline, now renamed No Cliché, were acquired to make new, original and exclusive titles for Sega's next as-yet-unannounced console.

The studio was established in 1997 a year before the Dreamcast was officially revealed, and being one of Sega's '1.5 party' developers, it meant close and unprecedented access to tools and hardware expertise from Sega than any developer outside of the company's in-house divisions in Japan ever had. "At the beginning I went to Japan maybe every one or two months to speak with other 1.5

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ALONE IN THE DARK (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PC, 3DO, IOS
RELEASED: 1992

LITTLE BIG ADVENTURE
PLATFORM: PC, PLAYSTATION
RELEASED: 1994

TIME COMMANDO
PLATFORM: PC, PLAYSTATION, SATURN
RELEASED: 1996

» [Dreamcast] The cat is a pretty benign presence, though you can shoot it if you're feeling cruel.

» Frédérick Raynal, creative director of *Toy Commander*. While less active in game development these days, he returned to co-develop Playdate title *SKEW* in 2023.

developers from Europe and we had meetings to speak about how it feels to work on the console, and they were demanding feedback about everything," Frédérick explains. "As we were close to Sega UK and Japan, we had very, very little relation with Sega Of America, so when there were two versions of the Dreamcast at the beginning – USA was working on a version with 3dfx, and Japan was working on the Katana with the PowerVR2 chip, which won – we were already working on the PowerVR version of the Dreamcast." So early was the access to the devkit that it existed simply as components on a circuit board with a plug and VGA output on the end – and Frédérick still has the Set-2 version in his office.

> "PART OF THE GAME WAS ABOUT CHOOSING THE RIGHT VEHICLE FOR THE RIGHT PART OF A MISSION"
> FRÉDÉRICK RAYNAL

As for what game No Cliché was to make for the Dreamcast, Frédérick says that after having his first meeting with Sega Europe's CEO Kazutoshi Miyake, he was essentially given complete freedom ("You know how to make games? So, make a game. Do what you want.") With the only condition being that it needed to be ready for the Dreamcast's launch in Europe.

The idea of playing with toys through the eyes of a child and imagining miniature figurines and vehicles actually engaging in warfare across everyday rooms of a house had come from the team's art director Didier Chanfray. While you might assume that Pixar's ground-breaking computer-animated film *Toy Story* had been an inspiration, it's not a comparison Frédérick likes to draw, perhaps given that Disney was also putting out its own *Toy Story*-related games around that time. "A lot of inspiration actually came from *Micro Machines* games, where you're racing with four cars on tables," he adds. "One of Didier's main ideas was also being able to drive cars on the wall of a house, and that was really the seed of *Toy Commander*."

Essentially, it wasn't so much toys as it was toy vehicles, and the opportunity to design a lot of them to accommodate all kinds of gameplay. From there, Frédérick expanded it so that gameplay could consist of missions across different rooms of a house. This was all wrapped up in a simple story where the in-game child Guthie's old toys led by Huggy Bear, his childhood teddy bear, stage a rebellion to destroy the new army-themed toys. As the Toy Commander, it's your job to make use of your wide-ranging toy vehicles to complete missions, defeat each room's boss toy, while unlocking more rooms in the house, ultimately culminating in a showdown with Huggy Bear in the basement.

There are more than 30 different toy vehicles for the player to control, covering both ground and air, which also had different functions, from race cars to tanks, helicopters to fighter jets, a dizzying variety for its time. That also gave

HOLIDAY EDITIONS

TOY COMMANDER'S FREE CHRISTMAS AND SUMMER-THEMED DEMOS

As was common at the time, the *Official Dreamcast Magazine* came with a demo disc called *Dream On*, which included playable demos of new, upcoming and existing games. As a 1.5 party studio, No Cliché went the extra mile and had its *Toy Commander* demos feature new holiday-themed missions.

The first of these had a Christmas-themed mission set in the Hallway and Mezzanine room, where in a twist from the original game, you got to control a toy Santa searching for five hidden presents to retrieve and place under the Christmas tree.

Although this St Nick is no fighter, you can fortunately also switch to either a fighter plane and truck with a gun turret to take down hostile forces in your way.

There was also a summer edition that transformed the winter garden of the house into a mini beach. It's your job to clear it of pollution in the form of garbage and bugs so that toy doll couple Matt and Jenny can have their beach holiday. More substantially, this demo included a new racing mission (perhaps a hint of things to come) as well as the Christmas mission for readers who might have missed it the first time around.

» [Dreamcast] *Toy Commander*'s Christmas mission feels in a similar spirit as *Christmas Nights Into Dreams*, which came free with the *Official Sega Saturn Magazine*.

» [Dreamcast] New rooms unlock only after completing a certain number of missions in the previous room.

» [Dreamcast] It's important to look out for power-ups in a level to ensure you don't run out of fuel, ammo or health.

SPINNING OFF ONLINE

HOW THE ONLINE-FOCUSSED BUDGET-PRICED TOY RACER CAME TO BE

Although No Cliché was hard at work on its next game – the sadly cancelled survival horror *Agartha* – in December 2000 it released a mini spin-off to *Toy Commander* called *Toy Racer*, a request that Frédérick says came from Sega to encourage more players to use the Dreamcast's free online servers. This was also down to online multiplayer only beginning in Europe in June 2000 with *ChuChu Rocket*, which was given away for free, as well as the dearth of games that actually supported the feature.

Having never made an online multiplayer game, the team decided to make a "cheap and quick" *Mario Kart* clone that made use of the *Toy Commander* engine's vehicle physics, sold for just £5 as a way to promote online gaming. That experience also led to several team members helping with the coding localisation for the European version of *Quake III Arena* also released that holiday.

While *Toy Racer* was designed for either online or local multiplayer, with just a training mode for single-player, online races can still be enjoyed to this day thanks to efforts from the Dreamcast community, as well as the game's producer Frantz Cournil who had kept and donated the game and server source code to make it possible.

» [Dreamcast] While pretty bare-bones, that's also reflected in the budget price point and the four months it took to develop *Toy Racer* from scratch.

Mission Failed
Oh, what a shame! You've lost one of your vehicles and now you can't finish this mission!
CYCLON
2'10"00
Missions Menu
Restart

» [Dreamcast] You may control multiple toys in a mission, but even one destroyed will mean failure.

» [Dreamcast] A hidden mission breaks from the premise as you race in the garden as a snail!

a different flavour to the missions, where you might be destroying a set of targets one moment, racing around the room in another, or using a carrier vehicle to transport toys from A to B, sometimes in the same mission. "Part of the game was about choosing the right vehicle for the right part of a mission, so that's why some missions have maybe two or three vehicles you can choose," Frédérick adds.

While individual missions have quite a tight focus of objectives and a target time to complete them in, the overall structure nonetheless had a sort of freedom to it since completing each mission wasn't strictly mandatory. "There's seven or eight missions per room and if you do only four or five of them you'll be able to fight the boss of the room, or you can continue to play the next room even if you don't defeat the boss," Frédérick explains. "But then the final big boss is Huggy Bear, and all the bosses you didn't defeat!"

It sounds almost like how in *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild* you can go and fight Ganon right away but also have to face the other bosses you skipped one after the other, or take your time to get stronger and have the Divine Beasts make the final battle easier. In *Toy Commander*'s case, each defeated boss becomes a toy that you can control, or an extra life, to fight against the heavily armoured Huggy Bear.

Given the variety of toys and rooms in the game, a multiplayer mode making use of the Dreamcast's four controller ports made for a perfect toy box for playing around with what you unlocked (the deathmatch nature of this mode does unfortunately mean unarmed toys like race cars aren't available). Although the idea of pitting ground and air vehicles against each other might seem unbalanced to modern competitive sensibilities, Frédérick remarks, "Playing a car against a plane was something I never saw before so I believe it was original."

With such a close-working relationship and two years development time, there also wasn't any issue with getting *Toy Commander* ready for the Dreamcast's European launch, whereas fellow 1.5 party Bizarre Creations' *Metropolis Street Racer* was delayed by a year. Frédérick speaks only fondly of this period of his career, saying, "We never had pressure from Sega, we

» [Dreamcast] Toy bosses tend to be fought 1v1 in smaller arenas, like this bedroom.

» [Dreamcast] Three toy vehicles is the most you can expect to swap between in the game's most complex missions.

» [Dreamcast] Toy owner Guthie's name in the US version is Andy, surely a nod to the same character in *Toy Story*.

» [Dreamcast] You can use the d-pad to change the camera view to the front or sides of your toy.

did our job in the right way." Indeed, the only issue that came up was more absurdly from Sega Of America, regarding the aesthetics of a black cat that can be seen wandering around the opening kitchen and dining room. "The artist built the 3D model of the cat and there's a small texture for the anus, which is just a pink circle behind it that's not very detailed," Frédérick recalls.

"The artist just did it like that, and we didn't discuss it. But when we made the US version, the Sega Of America rep asked us to remove the pink circle, so we were surprised!"

> "SINCE I STARTED MY FIRST GAMES IN THE EIGHTIES, IT WAS ALSO A PLEASURE FOR A PLAYER TO DISCOVER WHAT A GAME IS"
> FRÉDÉRICK RAYNAL

Although *Toy Commander* made the European launch, the reception was more mixed. Despite the colourful world it presented, much of the criticism was directed at the difficulty curve. That came in the form of the tricky control scheme, since with only one analogue stick, you were basically steering and aiming at the same time, but also the complexity of the missions themselves, delivered by the room's bosses in often vague terms.

While acknowledging the criticisms in hindsight, Frédérick also puts this down to the team's background. "We came from the PC world and from a time where we let the player understand themselves the way to play, which was not really something to do on a console," he explains. "Since I started my first games in the Eighties, it was also a pleasure for a player to discover what a game is, not like nowadays when you buy a game and you already know almost everything of how to play it before you play it."

There were plans to fix some issues in a PC port, which would have also added a mini-map and goal markers. Unfortunately, this was left unfinished after the disappointing commercial performance of the Dreamcast meant that Sega would exit the hardware race, and with that also shutter No Cliché. It was a bittersweet end for Frédérick, made worse as he was given the news in advance but couldn't break it to the rest of the team until it was officially announced. "I spent months lying to my guys, and that was hard for me," he laments. "I had the best time of my developer life working with them and then I had the hardest time of my life closing my studio."

It is a shame, considering that Sega Europe today still has acquired studios going strong, including Creative Assembly, Sports Interactive, and Two Point Studios. Nonetheless, No Cliché should still be remembered as the first of them and for making a game as original and playful as the console it launched with. ✱

» [Dreamcast] Planes versus cars might seem unfair, but the latter can race up walls if you use a ramp.

CITY TRANSIT
CITY TRANSIT
CITY TRANSIT
DAMAGE $1307168
BONUS X 10

Burnout 2: Point Of Impact

WHAT A SMASHING TIME WE HAD

» RETROREVIVAL

» GAMECUBE » 2002 » CRITERION GAMES

For me, this is the best *Burnout* game. I'm not counting *Burnout Paradise* in that, due to its open-world nature, but out of the classic *Burnout* games, this is my pick. It's the one before Electronic Arts took over as publisher and the series became more gimmicky, encouraging you to create chaos without real consequence. I can see the appeal of *Burnout 3: Takedown*, but I felt it lacked the risk-reward gameplay that the first sequel achieved so perfectly.

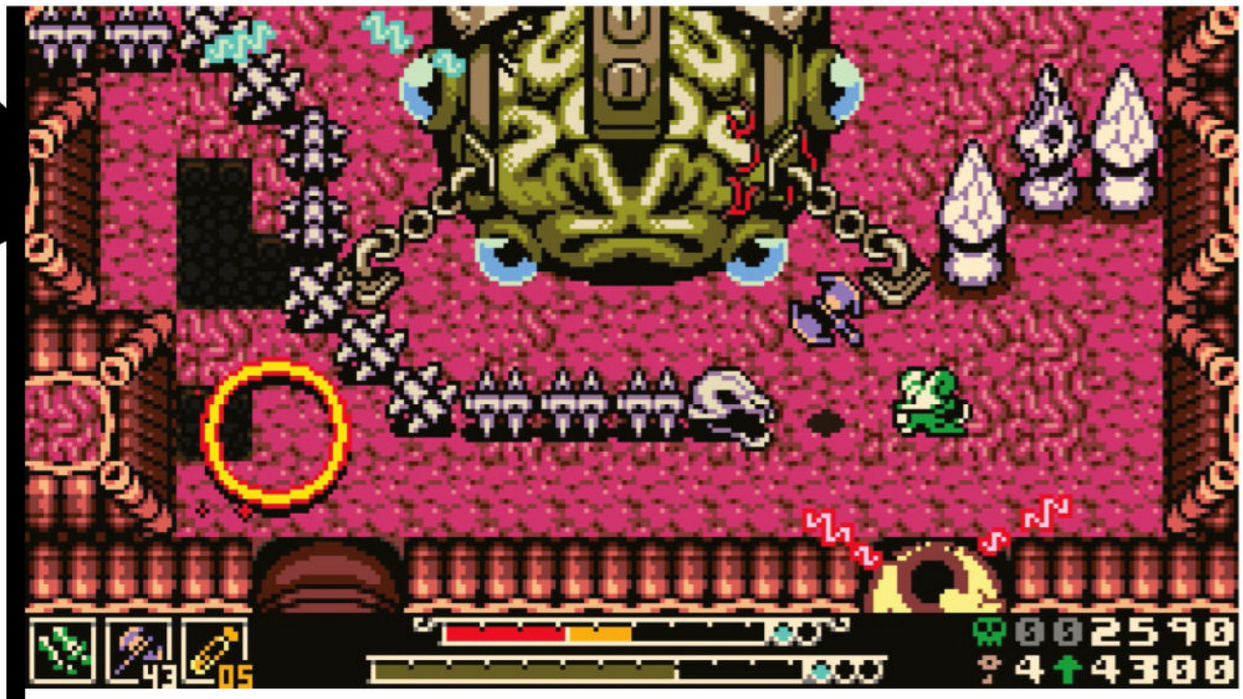
What *Burnout 2* also did was introduce Crash mode. Spectacular crashes have always been a defining element of the series… the slo-mo camera kicks in, showing your crumpled car flying through the air, jettisoning bits of bodywork. It's cool, but once you've seen it 500 times, you just want to restart the race immediately. In Crash mode, these moments – these points of impact – take centre stage. You're presented with a number of busy junctions and sections of highway, and the idea is to plough your car into the traffic and cause as much monetary damage as possible. The trick is to try and cause a chain reaction, where you slam into a car that jackknifes a truck that flips a bus. Ka-ching.

I remember loading up *Burnout 2* for some friends and they were largely dismissive of the main game. But then I switched to Crash mode and that was it – they were riveted for the evening, passing the pad around, taking turns to cause as much slo-mo carnage as possible. We went on to play it to an unhealthy degree and even developed our own spin on the challenge, where we tried to cause as little damage as possible. This came about by accident, when a friend somehow managed to miss every single vehicle as they sped through a junction, before slowly rolling into a barrier and causing just $10 of damage – a bizarre feat we never managed to repeat.

Crash mode returned in future *Burnout* games – and there was even a standalone digital release in 2011, *Burnout Crash!* – but for me they overstuffed it with lots of extras that detracted from the original's simple concept. It became bigger and flashier but not necessarily better. ✱

RETRORATED

>> This month we go burrowing with Mina, blast aliens in R-Type Dimensions III and Psyvariar 3 and even find time to explore the delightful pixel-art world of Clockwork Ambrosia



» [PC] Bosses can be quite the challenge and are one of the most frustrating aspects of the game.

Mina The Hollower

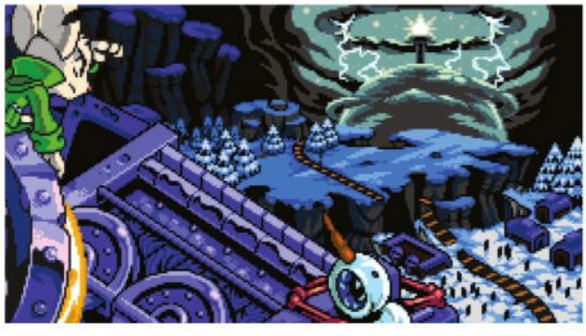
ARE YOU READY TO RIDE YACHT CLUB GAME'S EMOTIONAL ROLLER-COASTER?

INFORMATION

- **SYSTEM:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** MAC, PLAYSTATION 5, SWITCH, SWITCH 2, XBOX SERIES S/X
- **PRICE:** £17.75
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PUBLISHER:** YACHT CLUB GAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** YACHT CLUB GAMES
- **PLAYERS:** 1

» [PC] The game's cutscenes look lovely, typically appearing at key story points or when new locations are visited.

After crafting several games celebrating its popular hero *Shovel Knight*, Yacht Club Games has finally found a new protagonist to champion. Mina is not only an extremely clever mouse and inventor, but also a Hollower – a special guild member who studies the secrets of the Earth. When the Spark Generators she created on Tenebrous Island with her friend Lionel begin to malfunction he summons her back to fix them. As Mina embarks on her quest she continually comes to blows with Thorne, a bat who was once Lionel's head guard, who warns her that it's actually the Spark Generators that are the cause of all the island's troubles. Needless to say, shenanigans ensue.



Mina The Hollower is arguably the most ambitious game Yacht Club Games has attempted, with a fleshed out story, a huge world to explore and lots of interesting game mechanics that you'll need to master quickly if you hope to have any success fixing the game's Spark Generators. It's also the most frustrating game the team has ever made, with an opening which, quite frankly, is one of the most unenjoyable we've experienced for some time.

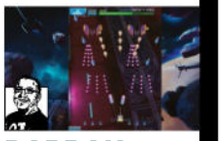
Part of this was due to the weapon we chose at the game's start, but the game's opening areas are also littered with pits which are easy to fall or get knocked into. Moreso, if you start with the twin daggers like we did, they'll knock you backwards with every successful strike, meaning it's far too easy to get knocked into a pit and lose your precious energy.

Mina's energy system also takes a while to get used to. Whenever you're hit or fall down a pit you lose energy. Successfully

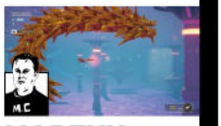
BRIEF HISTORY

» Yacht Club Games was founded by Sean Velasco, who was previously a director at WayForward Technologies. The studio's first game was *Shovel Knight*, a successful Kickstarter project, and it soon began publishing the games of other developers, including *Azure Striker Gunvolt: Striker Pack* and *Cyber Shadow*.

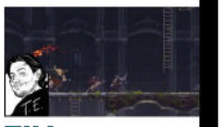
✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH



DARRAN
Psyvariar 3
Despite the large number of shmups I've played this month, this has had the most attention. It's great fun.



MARTYN
FZ: Formation Z
This slick update keeps pulling me back. It's perfect for sharpening those dulled shooting skills.



TIM
Blasphemous 2
I'd finished it (Darran still hasn't), but I'm being dragged back for more thanks to the free DLC!

» [PC] *Mina* has some nice puzzles, like funnelling lava towards those red crystals so you can access new areas.

striking an enemy adds a yellow portion to your bar and downing a Plasma Vial completely restores your health to wherever the yellow bar was. Unfortunately, there are portions of the game where it's possible to continually fall into holes and if no enemies are around (or you can't collect yellow flowers to expand your yellow energy bar) you'll inevitably die.

We don't want to say *Mina* suffers from bad game design, because it's clear that the world is brilliantly constructed, particularly when you fully master Mina's burrowing abilities that allow her to traverse the game world faster, jump across bigger gaps and access new areas, but the opening part of the game really suffers from a horrendous difficulty spike that made us not want to continue.

It's worth noting here that Yacht Club Games has included a wonderful amount of difficulty modifiers, including stopping damage from pit falls, but it's at the expense of not earning Achievements, which doesn't feel particularly fair and is likely to irk some players.

And yet, for all the troubles we faced in the first couple of hours, there's no denying that *Mina The Hollower* is a very good game. The levelling-up system is interesting, requiring you to use Bones (the game's currency) to increase your attack, defence and other skills, while Trinkets can be equipped that grant additional powers, from increasing the number of Plasma Vials you can carry to letting you walk more easily on certain surfaces.

As with many Souls-like games, *Mina*'s world resets whenever you save and you'll also be punished upon dying. Fortunately, Mina starts off with a Spark that stops her Bones from immediately disappearing upon death and more can be found hidden around Tenebrous Island. And what a wonderful place it is to explore, inviting and foreboding in equal measure.

Dangerous enemies litter the game's world, from the snowy drifts of Coltrane's Peak to the dank waters of Nox's Bayou. Along with the presence of those ever-annoying pits, there are treasure chests and shortcuts that lie tantalisingly just out of reach. Sometimes you'll need a Trinket to reach them, sometimes you'll need to use Mina's burrowing skills, but sometimes just a keen eye is all you'll need to solve a particular visual puzzle.

Feeling like a cross between *Castlevania* and *The Legend Of Zelda*, *Mina The Hollower* is a gorgeous-looking game, with a distinct Gothic design to its locations and a whole bunch of engaging anthropomorphic animal citizens to interact with. Outside of the game's difficulty spikes is the issue that it's not always clear where you're supposed to be going next, but once you unlock the game's fast-travel system, that becomes far less of a problem.

Mina The Hollower certainly isn't perfect, but it is a game that rewards those who have the patience to stick with it. If you don't care about Achievements we'd definitely recommend using some modifiers to make progress easier, because once it finally sucks you in, you'll never want to leave *Mina*'s world. ✱

In a nutshell

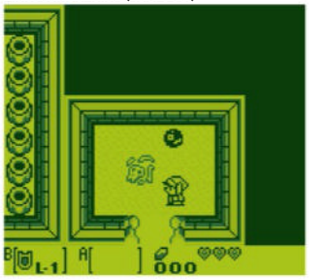
Yes it's brutally difficult at times, but if you can get past those early hurdles you'll discover a rich and engaging world that's absolutely filled with things to do. Highly recommended, providing you're up for a challenge.

≫ Score **85%**

✱ WHY NOT TRY

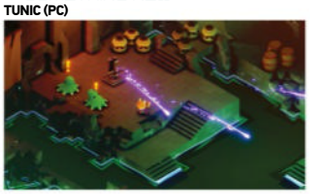
▼ SOMETHING OLD

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING (GAME BOY)



▼ SOMETHING NEW

TUNIC (PC)



» [PC] *Mina*'s difficult opening becomes far easier if you choose the Nightstar, as it keeps enemies at a distance.

» [PC] Your base can be accessed whenever you save and you can add new items to make your quest easier.

» [PC] *Mina*'s map isn't the best and signposting in general is one of our biggest gripes.

PICK OF THE MONTH

R-Type Dimensions III

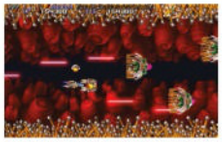
WILL THOSE EVIL BYDOS EVER LEARN?

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** PLAYSTATION 5
- **ALSO ON:** PC, SWITCH, SWITCH 2, XBOX SERIES S/X
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £29.99+ (DIGITAL)
- **PUBLISHER:** ININ GAMES
- **DEVELOPER:** KRITZELKRATZ 3000, TOZAI
- **PLAYERS:** 1-2

WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
R-TYPE DIMENSIONS (XBOX 360)



▼ SOMETHING NEW
R-TYPE DELTA: HD BOOSTED (SWITCH)

BRIEF HISTORY

» *R-Type III* debuted on the Japanese Super Famicom in December 1993 and arrived on the SNES the following year. It was technically the fourth game in the series, following the 1992 arcade-exclusive *R-Type Leo*. Prior to this new update, the game was converted to the GBA.

GO DEEPER

The Facts Behind R-Type Dimensions III

» The game is currently available as a digital download. If that doesn't take your fancy, the physical version of *R-Type Dimensions III* is being scheduled for 11 August 2026.

» Two premium physical editions of *R-Type Dimensions III* will be available: a *Special Edition*, which comes with an artbook and CD soundtrack, and a *Collector's Edition*, which includes all the *Special Edition* stuff plus an art print bundle and a 15cm-high figurine featuring iconic boss Dobkeratops.

So what is going on here then? Let's start with the title, which serves a dual purpose. This is the third in the *Dimensions* series of remasters, following the 2009 original (which collected together the coin-ops *R-Type* and *R-Type II*), and its enhanced 2014 *EX* release. It's also a remaster of *R-Type III: The Third Lightning*, which was released exclusively for the Super Nintendo in 1993. Both the original game and the previous *Dimensions* releases are held in high regard by *R-Type* fans, so expectations here are high.

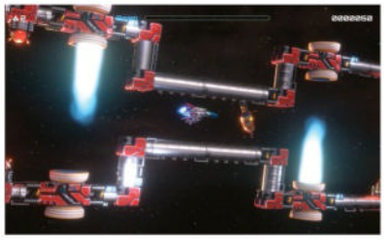
So what's going on with the graphics? As you can see from the screenshots, you can choose between the original 2D SNES graphics and new 3D visuals. As before, you don't need to faff around in the menus to toggle between the two – it's all done on the fly with a single button press. The transition effect is wonderful. If you're a 2D-playing purist, you'll definitely want to flick to 3D as you play, just to see how familiar stages have been reimagined. The organic-themed second stage and the fourth stage foundry are particular highlights when viewed in 3D, revealing an approach that's bold and rather beautiful. The optional 'Crazy' camera also returns, where the view will sometimes shift to 2.5D, similar to shooters like *Einhänder*. What's more, the audio changes along with the view, switching between the original chiptune music and newly created orchestrations. The upgrades don't end there. You can now select Advanced Mission – the original's more difficult second loop – from the get-go. Co-op play has also been added, allowing you to team up locally for the first time. These additions round out an impressive package.

» [PlayStation 5] If you're looking for good old Dobkeratops, you'll find him hiding in the fifth stage boss rush.

So how does it play? That's a pertinent question, because at launch the game was quite far from the authentic experience it claimed to be. It was clearly harder than the SNES original, and that was already very hard indeed. Enemies were faster and took more shots to destroy, the collision detection was overly sensitive and some of the hitboxes were out of alignment. This was not just limited to the 3D presentation; it also affected the 2D view which should have been accurate to the SNES version as a minimum. Thankfully, publisher ININ listened to community feedback and has since released an extremely weighty patch that fixes many of the initial gameplay issues.

It is regrettable that the game was released in its initial state, and hopefully a lesson learnt for ININ going forward – handle beloved shmups with care! The upside is that we now have a release that reminds us what a brilliant sequel the original SNES game was. It is evidently *R-Type*, but to succeed you need to unlearn what went before and embrace the new – ditch the classic Force in favour of the Shadow or Cyclone Force, and swap the traditional Beam Laser for the Hyper alternative. If you're looking for the opportunity to discover or revisit *R-Type III*, this modern recreation is now fit for purpose.

» [PlayStation 5] Co-op play is now supported, which is fun, but double firepower doesn't make the game much easier.



» [PlayStation 5] The 'Crazy' camera skews the view slightly, to 2.5D. It's a neat visual trick.

» [PlayStation 5] The fourth stage, set in a giant foundry, must be one of the trickiest challenges in shmupdom.

In A Nutshell

Teething problems aside, this is the classic SNES shooter, brought up to date with fantastic 3D visuals, co-op play and a wealth of customisable options.

>> **Score 84%**

YOUR GAME IS NOT OVER

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[Y]/[Y]

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PICK OF THE MONTH

Psyvariar 3

» System: PC (tested), PS5, Switch, Switch 2, Xbox Series S/X **» Buy it for:** £15.99+ (digital), £22.95 (PS5 physical) **» Buy it from:** Online, retail

We've always loved Success' *Psyvariar* series, and while the latest offering from Banana Bytes doesn't quite reach the heights of *Psyvariar 2*, it remains a great shmup in its own right.

If you've never played *Psyvariar* before, the aim is to 'bullet graze'; fly as close to bullets as possible to build up not only your 'buzz' but your overall level. Once you level up you're given a few brief seconds of invulnerability to careen into bullets and enemies and hopefully keep your chain of chaos going for as long as possible.

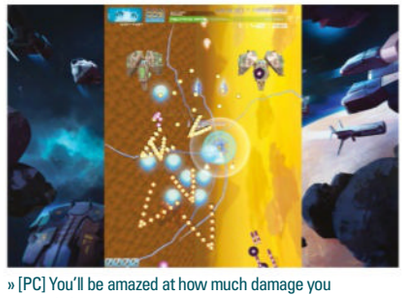
It certainly takes a while to get used to and plenty of deaths will ensue in the meantime, but once you get the hang of it you'll be able to rack up some truly impressive scores, as the level structure of *Psyvariar 3*'s scoring mechanics is deep and satisfying. Less satisfying is the game's visual design, which is outright garish at times. Fortunately, there's a brightness slider in the settings that helps with bullet recognition, but it's a shame that the overall ship design and bosses are rather bland and uninteresting. It's also disappointing that you can't save in-game replays.

Still, there's plenty of game here for your money. In addition to seven playable characters (including a few guest stars like Cotton and *Sophstar*'s Soph) who all have their own unique scoring mechanics and bombs, you have an Arcade and Practice mode, and an Arrange option, where you start on full power and deal with even faster and denser bullet patterns. Mission mode introduces specific challenges, there's a procedurally generated Endless mode and even a two-minute Caravan option that requires you to rack up the best possible score in just two minutes.

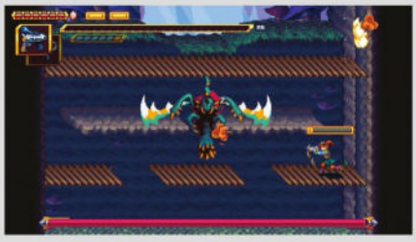
With its low price point, online leaderboards and huge amount of replay value, *Psyvariar 3* is a great new addition to the series. Here's hoping we don't have long to wait for a fourth game.

» **Score 88%**

» [PC] Bullet patterns can get complex, but that just leads to higher scoring potential.



» [PC] You'll be amazed at how much damage you can do in just two minutes.



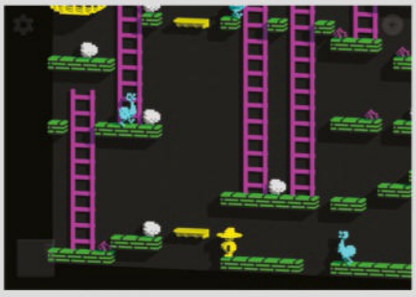
Clockwork Ambrosia

» System: PC **» Buy it for:** £13.49
» Buy it from: steampowered.com

2D Metroidvanias are everywhere these days, so you need to make sure yours stands out in the crowd. *Clockwork Ambrosia* does this through its weapon selection that gives you access to four distinct guns and lets you enhance them in all manner of clever ways. The game world is just as expansive and there are plenty of secrets to discover as you defeat rock-hard bosses, unlock new traversal abilities and interact with a host of characters. The biggest issues we have with Realmsoft's game is that it has some immense difficulty spikes and some weak signposting, which leads to lots of aimless wandering. Despite this, it is a lot of fun, largely down to its satisfying mechanics.

DARRAN JONES

» **Score 70%**



Chuckie Egg

» System: iOS (tested), tvOS **» Buy it for:** £2.99 (digital) **» Buy it from:** App Store

It's an ongoing debate 43 years after its debut – which version of *Chuckie Egg* was the best. To settle that argument, this remaster from Elite Systems features the ZX Spectrum and BBC Micro versions (it would have been nice to compare some of the other 8-bit versions too). They can be played in their original 2D form, or in new skewed/3Dish perspectives. As for the controls, virtual keyboards and precision platformers are not a good mix, so you'll want to use one of the supported controllers. There are competitive leaderboards too, if that's your thing. What else? It's *Chuckie Egg* and it's cheap.

MARTYN CARROLL

» **Score 70%**

FZ: Formation Z

» System: PS5 (tested), PC, Xbox Series S/X, Switch 2 **» Buy it for:** £24.99 (digital), £34.99+ (physical) **» Buy it from:** Online, retail

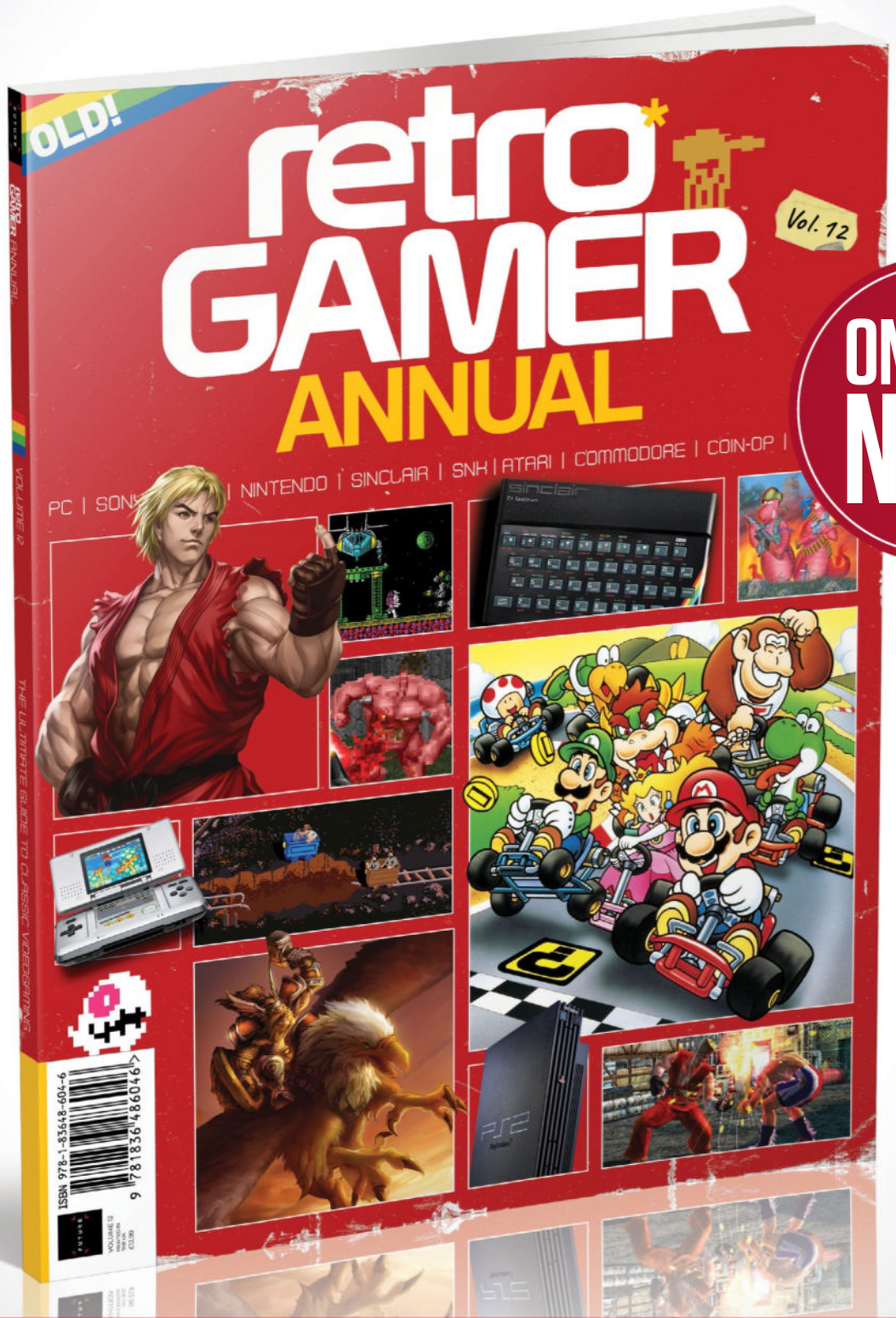
The promotional blurb for this remake calls Jaleco's original 1984 coin-op 'celebrated' and 'iconic'. In truth, 'obscure' might have been a better choice, certainly outside of Japan, but thankfully, this is not another random update. City Connection has taken the original's *Transformers*-inspired mechanic, where you can switch at will between a bounding robot and a sleek jet fighter, and turned it into a captivating, fine-looking shooter that will appeal to shmup fans of every persuasion. This modern take is complimented by a fitting new soundtrack by Daisuke Matsumoto. We didn't ask for this, but we're glad we got it.

MARTYN CARROLL

» **Score 86%**

CELEBRATE THE BEST OF RETRO GAMING IN 2025

Our latest tome features an incredible amount of fantastic content from Retro Gamer's past 12 months. Iconic characters, huge franchises and classic systems all feature, making it an essential read for retro fans. Don't miss it!



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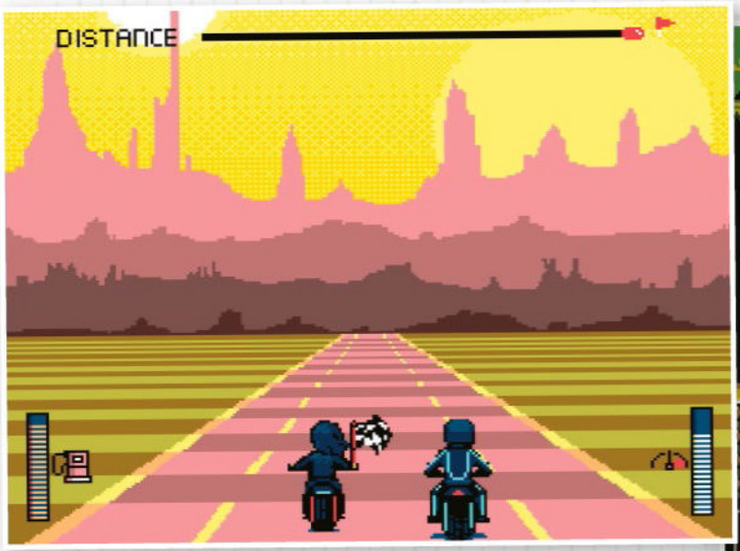
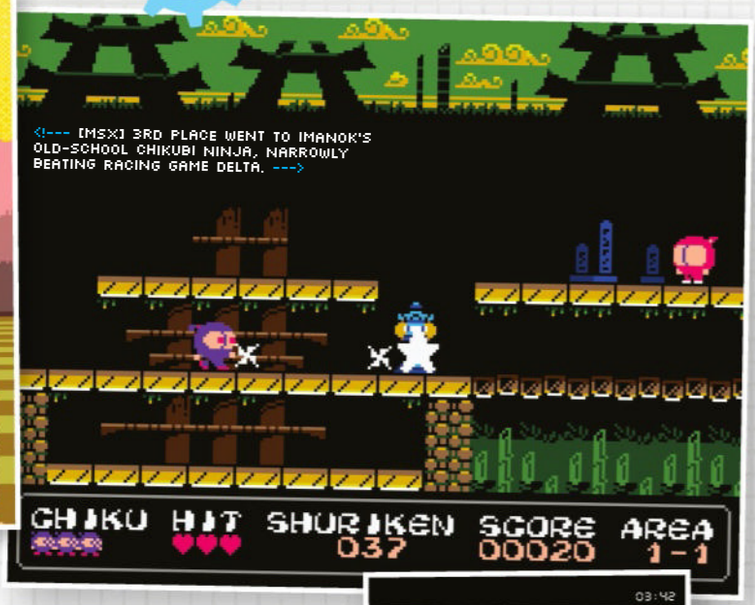
THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>



<!--- [MSX2] THE WINNER, SCORING 290 OUT OF 300, WAS NORAKOMI'S WOLF'S NEON HORIZON, WHERE YOU GRAB THE FLAG TO WIN A STAGE. --->



<INTRO> VETERAN CODERS ARE RETURNING TO OLD HARDWARE. COLIN PORCH IS RELEASING RETURN TO BLACKTOOTH (HEAD OVER HEELS 2) FOR THE AMIGA (THALAMUS.LINK/RTB-AMIGA) AND ST (THALAMUS.LINK/RTB-ATARIST) VIA THALAMUS DIGITAL. PETER HARRAP IS WRITING A NEW MONTY MOLE GAME FOR THE SPECTRUM NEXT, WHILE CHRISTIAN SHRIGLEY HAS USED HIS BRAND-NEW C64 ULTIMATE TO CODE THE C64 GAME THIN ICE. THE MSXDEV COMPETITION (OUR MAIN FEATURE) ALSO HAD VETERANS RETURNING TO MAKE MORE HOMEBREW, WHICH IS GREAT NEWS. </INTRO>

<MAIN HEADER>

COMPETITIVE CREATIONS

<INTRO> THE RECENT MSXDEV 2025 RECEIVED AN AMAZING 50 ENTRIES, SO WE WANTED TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS POPULAR CODING COMPETITION </INTRO>

<BODY> **Organiser Roman van der Meulen was impressed by the amazing 50 entries submitted to msxdev.org/msxdev25/ this year, "Some entries radiate that unmistakable Eighties MSX charm, and we're convinced they would've held their own back in the day."** As in previous years, a 'freestyle' theme was chosen, as Roman explains, "The wide variety of entries this year is likely connected to the fact that any MSX generation was allowed. A big part also comes from the many available extensions: music hardware, graphic expansions and even modern ROM cartridge formats. This year, we've seen several titles using new ROM cartridges with capacities of 4MB or more, which is remarkable. 16K games can still compete with multi-megabyte entries. It is all about gameplay, and the community knows this. And if that freedom encourages more people to develop games, then that's a win for everyone."

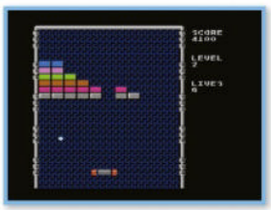
JOLLY GAME JAMS

<INTRO> RECENT COMPETITIONS THAT RECEIVED GREAT ENTRIES </INTRO>

AMIGAMEJAM 2025

bit.ly/amigamejam

<Among 20 great entries, the twin-stick blasting and neon visuals of *Echodrome* stood out. The theme was 'Return Of The Arcade'. />



BASIC 10-LINER 2026

bit.ly/basic10-2026

<Eric Carr's superb *Arkanoid* adaptation for the Atari 8-bit won the Extreme256 title, with 81 entries across the four available categories. />

SMS POWER 2026

bit.ly/smspower-2026

<With 26 entries, including a rather lovely *Super Mario Bros* port, the brilliant *Road Fighter* conversion by badcomputer and chirinea really stood out. />

BYTE OFF VI

bit.ly/byteoffvi

<With 48 NESmaker entries on the theme 'It's The Destination, Not The Journey', Dale Coop's *A Journey Into The Unknown* earned high praise. />

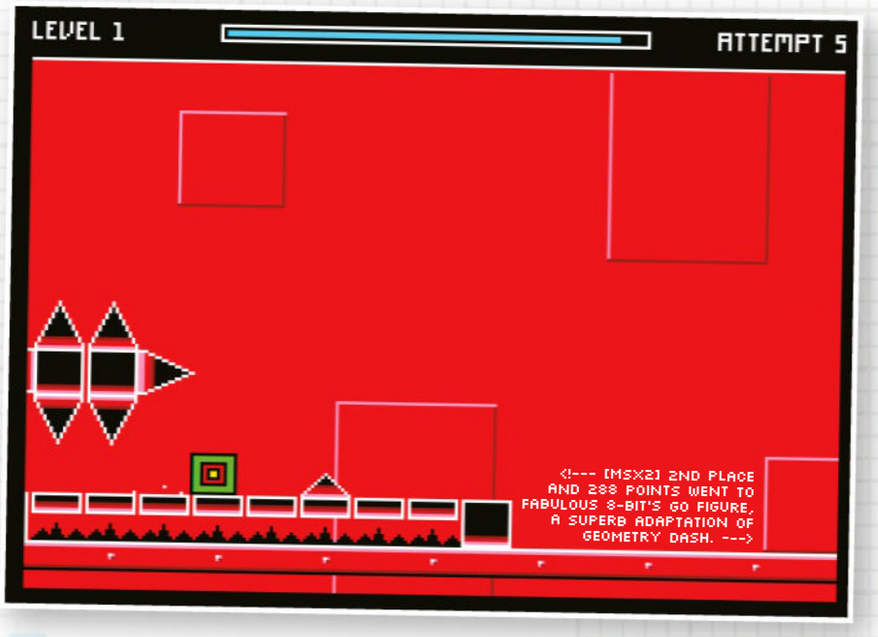
SATURN HOMEBREW SHOWCASE 31

bit.ly/saturn31

<The annual Saturn competition saw 2023's *Disasteroids* get a Netlink mod, allowing up to 12 players online or locally. />

NEW GAMES NEEDED

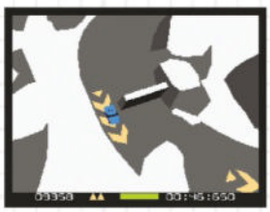
Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

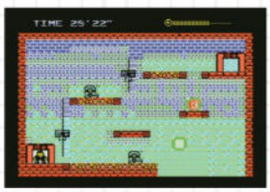


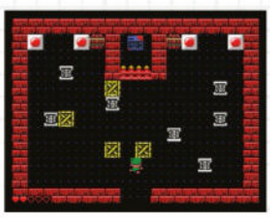
From graphically intensive point-and-click *Soul Trapped* to a pixel-perfect MSX2 recreation of the original *Space Invaders*, there have been some great entries, but what has surprised Roman? "The biggest surprises are usually the games that push the envelope or take an unexpected creative route. But what truly caught us off-guard this year were the familiar names – well-known creators from the past who suddenly reappeared, rolled up their sleeves, and dropped brand-new ideas into the competition. Seeing veterans return to the scene with fresh energy is a special kind of surprise, and perhaps one of the most rewarding parts of organising MSXdev."

Creators are encouraged to include a text file or PDF with instructions and notes on how to run the game. Many are playable in the classic blueMSX emulator or online via file-hunter.com thanks to Paulo Peccin's WebMSX. More complex titles needed the OpenMSX emulator. "Some go deep into technical wizardry, others embrace the classic constraints, and some mix old-school charm with modern hardware expansions," Roman remarks. "That diversity is exactly what keeps the competition so awesome." One such developer is Nanochess, aka Óscar Toledo Gutiérrez (see **RG** 277's interview). He did his own blog on developing run-and-gun *Metro Wars* for MSXDEV, available at bit.ly/metrowars-blog

Thanks to sponsors and individuals, prize money and physical prizes are awarded to the top games as judged by the expert panel. Roman and the team draw inspiration from other competitions. "Take the recent Spectrum YRGB compo, for example – *Cubix* is a genuine piece of art, pushing boundaries with that 3D rotating tower. If its author ever decided to port it to a future edition of MSXdev, that would be quite something. It's inspiring to see how different communities approach game development, presentation, and judging." Will we see another MSXdev start later in 2026? "As long as everyone keeps having fun, there will be another edition," Roman replies. "The enthusiasm, the creativity, the community spirit… that's what keeps MSXdev alive." </BODY>







NEWSBYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

<Amiga: Modern Video Gamer converted the 1983 arcade game *Zippy Racer*, running on OCS with 1MB of memory. You can play it by zipping on over to bit.ly/zippy-amiga />

<Atari XE/XL: Vega has converted the classic sword-fighting game *Barbarian: The Ultimate Warrior* (above), 64K memory, PAL and NTSC compatible. Check bit.ly/barbarian-atarixl />

<BBC Micro: *Chuckulus* (see **RG** 286) is now available at bit.ly/chuckulus />

<C64: *Escape From PETSCII Planet* by Jimbo is a *Wolfenstein*-style FPS in PETSCII graphics, with a level editor also available. Get blasting at bit.ly/petsciiplanet-c64 />

<Game Boy: *Mowalot* from Mike Daw sees you using a magic lawnmower in this Roguelike game, available in Color and Advance versions. Mow your way over to mike-daw.itch.io />

<Mega Drive: Jungrock is converting *Super Meat Boy*, with the current version featuring 50 levels. Navigate over to bit.ly/meatboy-md />

<N64: *Junkrunner64* by James Lambert gives a massive open-world environment to explore. Try it at bit.ly/junkrunner64 />

<PICO-8: *Sally's Star Racers PX* from Palo Blanco Games is a *Mario Kart*-style racer you can play online at bit.ly/sallypx-p8 />

<Plus/4: *Popp!* from Csabo and KiSCHY is a brilliant *Puzzle Bobble* clone. Get popping at bit.ly/popp-plus4 />

<Various: NetHack v5.0.0 has been released, with binaries including MS-DOS and Amiga. Get hacking by visiting nethack.org />

<Vectrex: The Vectrex Academy (see **RG** 255) has returned for 2026, with multiple projects in development. There's a lot more info over at bit.ly/vectrex2026 />

<ZX Spectrum: Puzzle platformer *The Tower Of Ochate* from Flunky Retro is playable in English, Spanish and Portuguese – with hard and easy versions, supporting 48K and 128K. Get it at bit.ly/ochate-zx />

CHAMPION CODER

VMV (AKA OLD_PIRATE)

<INTRO> THE UKRAINIAN CODER HAS SPECIALISED IN PORTING CLASSIC GAMES TO NEW FORMATS </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: DNEPROPETROVSK, UKRAINE WEBSITE: OLD-PIRATE.ITCH.IO / PATREON.COM/C/OLDPIRATE FORMAT: MEGA DRIVE PREVIOUS GAME: FROM BELOW, WITCH 'N WIZ (CONVERSIONS FROM NES) WORKING ON: KULA WORLD (32X) />

WHEN DID YOU START PROGRAMMING FOR OLD CONSOLES?

<I've dreamed of making a game for the Mega Drive since I was a kid. How many people can boast that their childhood dream came true? It all started with ROM hacking. I was shocked when I learned that you could modify your favourite games. Programming gave full rein to the imagination, so serious projects began in 2009-2010. I'm glad I had the opportunity to create and make people happy. />

DO YOU PREFER CONVERTING GAMES TO WRITING SOMETHING ORIGINAL?

<I love the process of creating a game. When the game world comes to life, it's an indescribable feeling. Now I prefer to make ports, preferably if the game has source code, as this makes creation easier and faster. />

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT?

<For the 32X, it mainly uses the Chilly Willy toolchain. For Mega Drive, SGDK, and for Master System, I use devkitSMS. As for the tools, they are mostly custom-written by me for specific tasks, such as converting graphics to the required format, unpacking certain resources, etc. />

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO CONVERT KULA WORLD TO THE 32X?

<I think it's a difficult console to create games for, but I think this game is perfect for the 32X. It doesn't need a powerful 3D engine. />

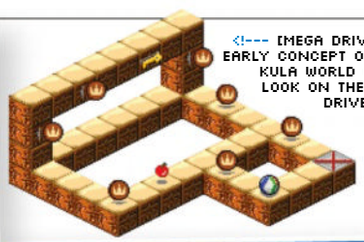
HOW DOES THE OPENLARA ENGINE FROM XPROGER HELP?

<Initially, I took the 3D engine from SGDK as the basis and modified it, but it turned out not to be as fast as I needed. I saw how *Tomb Raider* works on a 32X, and it was cool. I only needed the 3D component of the OpenLara engine. />

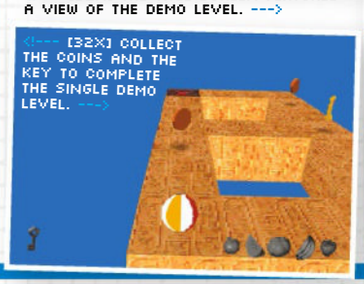
NOW YOU HAVE A DEMO OF KULA WORLD, WHAT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE?

<There is still a lot of difficult work ahead. Right now, it looks good visually, but at the code level, it's a mess. I need to make level creation convenient and understandable. />

<!--- [32X] THE TITLE SCREEN FEATURES A VIEW OF THE DEMO LEVEL. --->



<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] AN EARLY CONCEPT OF HOW KULA WORLD COULD LOOK ON THE MEGA DRIVE. --->



<!--- [32X] COLLECT THE COINS AND THE KEY TO COMPLETE THE SINGLE DEMO LEVEL. --->

<!--- [32X] YOUR VIEWPOINT CAN BE ROTATED TO 'LOOK' ALONG THE PATHS. --->

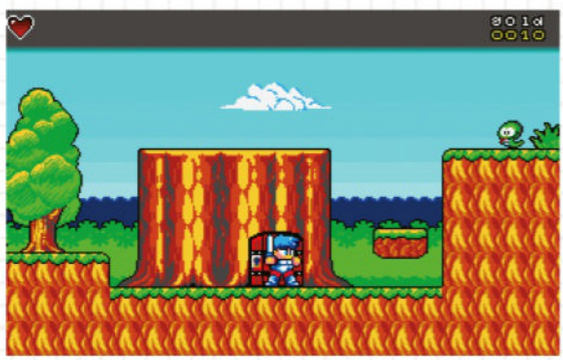
DATA BURST

MIRACLE BOY IN DRAGON LAND

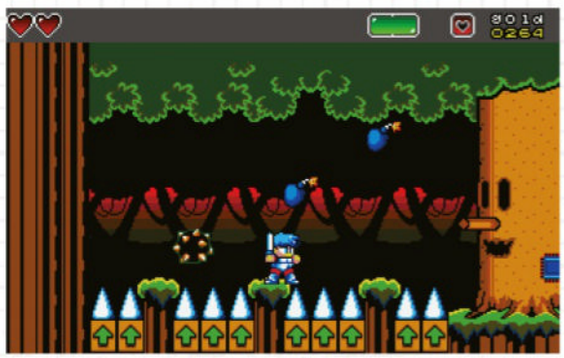
<INFO FORMAT: ATARI ST/STE (1MB MINIMUM, 2MB FOR DIGITAL SOUND FX) CREDITS: SAMSOFT (DEVELOPER) PRICE: €65 (PHYSICAL EDITION) / €15 (DIGITAL DOWNLOAD) WEB: BIT.LY/DRAGON_LAND />

<BODY> **Previewed way back in RG 245, Samuel Blanchard's ST masterpiece has finally arrived.** When Count Drago and his dragons invade Miracle Land, it's up to a descendant of TomTom to find the magic items that will stop them. In a wonderful homage to the later *Wonder Boy* RPGs, you set out armed with the Gradius Sword and Armour, defeating enemies for gold to be spent at shops on upgrades and potions. Staying at an inn will save your progress. Your first task is to visit Queen Purpiril, then head through the monster-filled beach to reach Poroporo. Here, you can buy a Dragon16 console, play a game of *Columns* on it, and find out how to reveal the Magic Academy. Then it's off to retrieve the first of the magic artefacts by defeating the venerable boss in the forest. This is a gorgeous-looking game, with cute sprites and detailed background evoking the classic *Wonder Boy* titles and loads of clever effects (such as travelling underwater). The soundtrack is brilliant with each area having a distinctive tune. The inventory screen is cleverly done, giving you a helpful text about each item. There is a big quest to get through, with real joy in discovering hidden secrets and making progress. The wait may have been long, but it has absolutely been worth it. </BODY>

SCORE: 91%



<!--- [ATARI ST] THIS EARLY MOMENT IS STRONGLY REMINISCENT OF SUPER WONDER BOY. --->



NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- [ATARI LYNX] AVOID THE JUMPING FISH AND THE LAVA. --->

<!--- [ATARI LYNX] DODGE BETWEEN THE FAMILIAR ROTATING BEAMS. --->

WEE NINJA

<INFO FORMAT: LYNX CREDITS: PLAYSOFT (CONVERSION), SONGBIRD PRODUCTIONS (MUSIC, PUBLISHING) PRICE: $69.95 (BOXED CARTRIDGE) WEB: BIT.LY/WEENINJA-LYNX />

<BODY> **Based on Playsoft's excellent Atari 5200 game, the Temple Guardians are bringing chaos to Weetopia!** Wee Ninja must jump, swim and fight through eight worlds, defeating foes and stopping the Guardians in their tracks. In classic *Super Mario Bros* style, each world has four sublevels, with a large boss waiting at the end. Bashing your head against bricks can reveal power-ups; red makes you invincible for a short time, blue gives you limited shuriken to shoot, and black gives you a short-lived sword. Defeating a Guardian gives a code to resume at the next world, with the best times saved to the cartridge. Colourful graphics, parallax scrolling, two difficulty levels and an enjoyable soundtrack make this great fun and highly recommended. </BODY>

SCORE: 86%

<!--- [PC] THE THREE-PHASE METER SHOWS WHEN THE BOSS CHANGES ATTACK PATTERNS. --->

COSMO KNIGHT ZION

<INFO FORMAT: STEAM CREDITS: ZEICHI GAMES (PUBLISHER) PRICE: £6.29 WEB: BIT.LY/COSMOKNIGHT />

<BODY> **After the Kickstarter for physical cartridges, this Game Boy Color platformer is now playable on Steam.** When robots invade the Earth, Zion uses a suit of cosmic armour to fight back, while saving his girlfriend Eerie and other humans. There are five huge scrolling levels split into smaller sections, hidden secrets and challenging bosses to fight. Pixel cutscenes and dialogue narrate the story, while Zion's armour gains extra powers as you progress. Finding the hidden Cosmo Gems and completing the built-in achievements add depth to a well-made but tricky game. </BODY>

SCORE: 81%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> GEOFF NEIL IS GETTING TACTICAL WITH HIS MEDIEAVAL-THEMED SPECTRUM NEXT GAME, THE PORTAL WAR </INTRO>

<BODY> **Geoff Neil's new game is inspired by a true classic.** "It's a turn-based strategy game, loosely based on *Advance Wars*, but in a medieaval setting and the follow-up to *SpecQuest*, an RPG I wrote for the Spectrum +3. The game is being developed in Z80 assembler."

SpectrumNez is testing the game and provided the music, as Geoff reveals, "It was terrific when Neil came on board. He has suggested many improvements. David Saphire was very helpful with getting Neil's compositions to play on the Next. There is also sampled speech, streamed from the SD card, for the story and tutorials."

The team are looking for a publisher and hoping to release the game alongside the incoming Kickstarter 3 machines, with plenty of planned content. "There are thirteen maps for the main quest/story, ten additional maps as a bonus once the main story is completed, and ten two-player maps. The player can save progress halfway through a map, and progress is saved once a map is completed." Prepare for battle, or try Geoff's previous titles at bit.ly/geoffs-games </BODY>

<!--- [SPECTRUM NEXT] THE WHITE AREA HIGHLIGHTS THE POTENTIAL MOVEMENT RANGE, WITH THE TROLLS NEXT TO THE PLAYER'S CURRENT UNIT TARGETED. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

SUPER NINTENDO MEMORIES

The team reminisces about Nintendo's second home console

DARRAN JONES

MARTYN CARROLL

TIM EMPEY

Putting together this issue's mini-mag has prompted lots of talk about the Super Nintendo and its enviable library of great games. The retrobates discuss their first experience of the console, Mode 7 reactions, defining games – and whether everything about the console really was 'super'.

DARRAN

What's the first Super Nintendo game you both played?

TIM

It was *Super Mario Kart* for me, round at a friend's place. They thrashed me though as they'd been playing it for ages and it was my first go!

MARTYN

Mine would have been *Street Fighter II*, the first vanilla version. My best mate had a SNES and for ages he had just that and one other game, *F-Zero*. We played them both to death. Later on we played a lot of *Mario Kart* too.

DARRAN

I got a SNES from the US so I was there at the beginning with *Super Mario World*, *F-Zero* and *Pilotwings*. All of which were amazing. Did anyone else get blown away by the Mode 7 of the SNES?

MARTYN

Mode 7 was a bit special. *F-Zero* in particular was a revelation. Really added an extra dimension to that game. These days the effect makes me feel a bit woozy.

TIM

Yeah it was pretty impressive for the time. Thankfully I had no issues with feeling woozy.

MARTYN

Darran, what prompted you to import your SNES?

DARRAN

I imported everything from the Mega Drive onwards. I was a massive NTSC snob as a youngster so to me it made sense to play the games as they were originally intended. Plus you'd get stuff months before the UK. I remember seeing *Super Castlevania IV* in Currys and laughing at the demo because I'd already been playing it for a year and the PAL conversion looked terrible, with squashed sprites and sluggish movement. Did you end up owning your own machines?

> "I hated the controller. It did something weird to my hands and I could never get on with it"
> TIM EMPEY

TIM

Unfortunately not, I ended up buying a Mega Drive. I'm not sure why I chose it over the SNES, the different version of *Street Fighter II* probably.

MARTYN

I didn't actually get my own until a few years later, I think the late-Nineties. I got the pack with the *Super Mario All-Stars* cart that had the four remade *Super Mario Bros* games. That is surely one of the best pack-in carts ever.

DARRAN

My US machine came with *Super Mario World*, which was obviously fantastic. I think you're right about your pack though. In fact that might be one of the first remakes off the top of my head. So what does everyone think the SNES excelled at?

MARTYN

Going back to Mode 7, that really separated the machine from the Mega Drive for me. In terms of games, it was home to so many brilliant and expansive RPGs.

TIM

The generational leap in graphics was great, but, and I might get some flak for this, I hated the controller. It did something weird to my hands and I could never get on with it.

MARTYN

I know what Tim means. The controller wasn't the best.

» [SNES] Rare's *Donkey Kong Country* and its pre-rendered graphics surprised both Tim and Martyn.

» [SNES] The genre-defying *ActRaiser* is the game that defines the SNES for Darran.

» [SNES] Darran shelled out £120 for his imported copy of *Star Fox*. It was clearly worth it.

» [SNES] As launch games go, they don't come much bigger or better than *Super Mario World*.

I think it was the shoulder buttons that let it down for me. They were a bit awkward.

DARRAN

That's a controversial take, chaps! I really liked the controller, although the colour scheme on the US one was naff. It looked like it was sponsored by Parma Violets. I do think the Mode 7 helped separate it and it had some monstrously good RPGs and exclusives. Shame its shmups were a little weak. Did anyone grab a SNES Mini when it was released?

MARTYN

Yes, it's currently with all my other mini-consoles that I've bought and never actually unboxed. I recall it has a really solid list of games built-in.

TIM

I didn't pick it up myself, though I see *Earthbound* is on it. Maybe it's worth it just for that?

DARRAN

Absolutely, Tim. Oh, and the fact it's the only official way to get a physical version of *Star Fox 2* isn't too shabby either.

» [SNES] *Super Mario All-Stars* memorably collected the three *Super Mario Bros* games (plus *The Lost Levels*) on one generous cart.

It's packed with bangers to be fair, even before you get around to modding it. So what game defines the SNES for you?

TIM

Donkey Kong Country. I remember seeing it on TV – *GamesMaster* or *Bad Influence* maybe – and just being so impressed by the graphics.

MARTYN

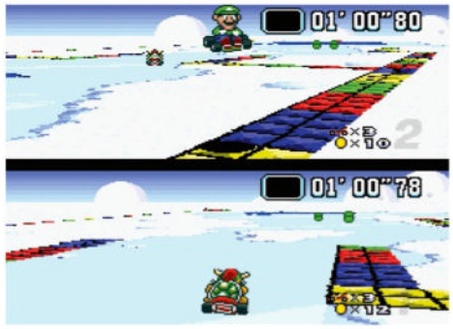
The same, *Donkey Kong Country*. I watched it being demoed in my local Game store and couldn't believe it was a SNES game. It's pretty cool how developers continued to push the hardware – and of course there was the Super FX chip that supercharged the visuals in some later games.

DARRAN

For me it's *ActRaiser*. A weird one, but it was a killer exclusive that highlighted the versatility of the console. With regards to the Super FX chip, I paid £120 for my US copy of *Star Fox*!

MARTYN

£120? That's mad! You could have bought an actual SNES console for that much.



» [SNES] How many days, weeks, months did we lose to the delightful *Super Mario Kart*?

» [SNES] *F-Zero* was the first game to showcase the console's fancy Mode 7 graphics mode.

» [SNES] Martyn's early memories of the SNES involved a helluva lot of *Street Fighter II*.

READERS REACT

So what was your favourite SNES game?

AndyGenX
Sim City. It was my first city builder. Such a satisfying game, so therapeutic. The music ramping up as the city grew and the seasons changing just brought it to life. And who else left the SNES on all night to wake up to either loads of money or burning embers?

Dan Whitehead
Zombies Ate My Neighbors – ridiculously generous, stuffed with a constant array of new stuff, and a perfect parody of B-movie silliness.

Kednavikit
Secret Of Mana. First ever RPG I played, got it as a gift when I graduated from middle school, spent the entire summer on it, finished on the last day of my holidays. It had such an impact I bought it several times.

Super Jim
Metal Marines. How *Battleships* meets *Command & Conquer* flew under the radar (hyuk hyuk) is beyond me. Never gets a shout out on anything which is a shame. A fantastic strategy game and pretty unique on the system.

Big McLargehuge
Yoshi's Island. It was pure magic, and in the decades since, Nintendo has never been able to recreate its charm.

Rhys Wynne
Super Metroid. An absolute masterpiece in game design, conveys the feeling of being alone in a world that subtly holds your hand. Still leads the way in its genre over 30 years later.

Martin Eriksson
A Link To The Past was the first console game I completed. An older friend and I took turns travelling through Hyrule. A magical summer.

Gametto
Final Fantasy III (*VI*). My dad died of a fatal heart attack when I was 14 in early December. That game was the gift he bought prior for me for Christmas, so it was my teenage coping game.

ACO
Donkey Kong Country. How Rare made those visuals without Sega-style add-ons? Nothing short of amazing!

Zocksofa
Axelay, because, "Arms installation is completed. Good luck!"

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

SPACE QUEST 3
"This is the first point-and-click adventure I completed. Bought from The Games Store in Middlesbrough in 1989."
AMOUNT PAID: £29

SEGA DREAMCAST
"I won this in a YouTube raffle. A good friend of mine, Craig from Goodwins Place, made this one-off *Street Fighter* Sega Dreamcast."
AMOUNT PAID: FREE

TARGET: RENEGADE
"*Double Dragon* was my twin brother's and my favourite arcade game. When *Target: Renegade* was released on the Spectrum, we were blown away. It's still playable today, a classic."
AMOUNT PAID: £5

A COLLECTION THAT CLICKS

Marcus Carter has a great mix of point-and-click adventures and hardware to share

Words by Faith Johnson

BIO

NAME:
Marcus Carter

LOCATION:
Teesside

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
No idea

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Atari ST / Commodore Amiga

FAVOURITE GAME:
Double Dragon

YOUTUBE:
@DadLadsGaming

Marcus Carter has had a long history with videogames spanning over 50 years and has always collected them. "Being born in the early Seventies and regularly going to Butlins for holidays, I fondly remember going to the arcades from an early age," he begins. "I vividly remember getting lost in the arcade in Filey Butlins when I was about five years old. This was the start of my love of gaming. My eldest brother then got a ZX81, which coincided with my twin brother winning an Atari 2600 in the *Battle* comic. At the time, it was like winning the lottery. I never looked back after that."

But when did collecting retro games become serious? "I don't really consider myself ever 'getting into retro gaming', but I've always been into gaming," Marcus explains. "I've still got the childhood Atari 2600. I then inherited my eldest brother's rubber-keyed Spectrum, which I still own. Essentially, I've always looked after my gaming stuff and never parted with it. I've always enjoyed collecting what I consider good games for every console and computer I've owned."

We ask Marcus what things he considers when making a new purchase. "Nowadays, I'm really obsessed with hardware, getting the best out of the old systems and having good quality options, both HD and CRT for all systems," we're told. "Most retro-gaming purchases tend to be point-and-click big box games. There is something special about all the additional stuff that comes in the big box."

Speaking of hardware, Marcus feels one of the best bargains he ever had was a great monitor scoop. "I managed to get five PVMs and a couple of Extron Crosspoint switchers before they became really sought-after for a couple of hundred pounds. It did involve an epic road trip, but well worth the time and effort. They are now a big part of the retro setup."

Marcus then explains what systems his favourites are and why. "I love all gaming, I still get excited for new console releases, but my favourites will always be the Atari ST and the Commodore Amiga. I was lucky enough to have both in the late-Eighties, and I still have both linked up in my setup, fantastic for *Stunt Car Racer*. This is also where my love for point-and-click adventure gaming started. Most people my age think of *Monkey Island*, but I always preferred the Sierra On-Line point-and-clicks such as *Space Quest 3*, which is my favourite of the genre."

We ask if Marcus has anything he is looking to purchase in the future. "I'm not looking for anything specific, but I'm always on the lookout for big box point-and-click games for the PC, Amiga, and ST. I'm really pleased that some companies are starting to offer modern retro point-and-clicks in big boxes. There are loads of amazing titles regularly released on Steam, which I always look out for in physical releases."

We finish by asking Marcus what his Grail item would be. "I was lucky enough to get a couple of Candy Cabs as a 50th birthday present a couple of years ago, which I'd wanted for decades. They were always my Grail. Since then, I'd say a high-end BVM, capable of 1080i output. I really enjoy the hardware side of retro gaming nowadays."

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com retrogamermag.bsky.social

TIME CRISIS

"My girlfriend, now wife, bought me this in 1997. I'm a massive fan of lightgun games, and this was outstanding when it was released."

AMOUNT PAID: GIFT

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

ASTRO CITY CANDY CABS

■ "My wife bought me both for my 50th birthday. I have wanted an arcade cabinet all my life. Over the last 20 years, the desire was for a Candy Cab. I love the aesthetic of them."

PAID: GIFT

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

ASSASSIN'S CREED (XBOX 360)

There's no need to commit any crimes to get a great copy of this Ubisoft adventure, as complete copies with a manual regularly sell for under **£5.**

ATIC ATAC (ZX SPECTRUM)

Depending on the condition, this classic sells between **£6** and **£12.** Some mint examples have sold for over **£15.**

ZOMBI (AMSTRAD CPC)

There aren't many copies of this *Dawn Of The Dead*-inspired action adventure classic around. As a result, most copies sell for over **£100.**

PHOENIX (ATARI 2600)

There are plenty of loose cartridge copies of *Phoenix* available for under **£10,** while a clean boxed copy costs about **£30.** Happy hunting.

LEGO INDIANA JONES: THE ORIGINAL ADVENTURES (XBOX 360)

There's no need to raid savings for this classic as copies regularly sell for around **£5.** The budget reprint is even cheaper.

BURNOUT 2: POINT OF IMPACT (GAMECUBE)

This one usually sells for about **£15,** but good condition copies can hit **£20,** while mint copies of Criterion's sequel go for over **£30.**

LYLAT WARS (NINTENDO 64)

Loose PAL carts cost under **£10,** but collectors wanting the full package with the Rumble Pak will pay up to **£50.** The US NTSC edition is even pricier to buy.

MIRROR'S EDGE (XBOX 360)

There's absolutely no need to push your finances to the edge when searching for this DICE classic, as most copies of this excellent game sell for about **£6.** If you fancy owning a sealed copy of *Mirror's Edge*, you should find it for no more than **£20.** You just gotta have faith.

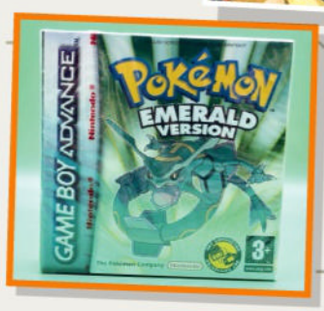
TOY COMMANDER (DREAMCAST)

If you enjoyed our Making Of and fancy owning a copy of this PAL launch game it's child's play. There are plenty of copies of *Toy Commander* available and it ranges in price from **£10** to **£25** depending on condition.

HOW MUCH?!

POKÉMON EMERALD

The buyer may have parted with some real emeralds to stump up the **£3,800** for this sealed copy of *Pokémon Emerald* on the Game Boy Advance. Wowsers!



Prices correct at time of print

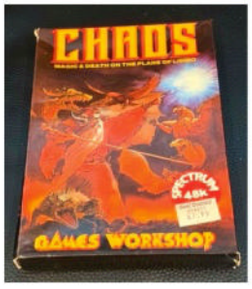
» [ZX Spectrum] Master magician has created a Golden Dragon.

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** GAMES WORKSHOP / FIREBIRD
- **DEVELOPER:** JULIAN GOLLOP
- **PLATFORM:** ZX SPECTRUM
- **RELEASED:** 1985
- **PRICE TODAY:** £150+

» [ZX Spectrum] Each creature (and wizard) has its own set of statistics.

» Here's a look at the internal contents of the big box version of *Chaos*. Image courtesy of Gary McGeechan.



» Gary McGeechan kindly shared his big box edition with us. Love that art!

CHAOS

Initially hampered by Games Workshop's withdrawal from the software market, Julian Gollop's Chaos has become a firm favourite with many Spectrum fans since, revered as one of the computer's finest multiplayer games

Words by Graeme Mason

THE GAME

It begins and ends on the Plane Of Limbo, a dark and foreboding place where powerful wizards battle to the death. Each possesses a range of devastating spells. Personal buffs, such as Shield and Sword, transform them into tooled-up warriors, while they can use environmental spells like Gooey Blob and Magic Fire for both defensive and attacking purposes. But it is with *Chaos*' monsters that the game shines. Here, conventional animals sit with the fantastical in a magical bestiary of good, evil and neutral creatures. Top of the pile are undoubtedly the dragons, near-invincible fire-breathing lizards capable of spreading destruction across the plane. Behind each spell is a casting percentage. Formidable creatures (such as dragons) typically have only a 10 or 20% chance of succeeding; at the other end of the spectrum, the lowly giant rat and zombie are almost guaranteed to materialise. However, wizards can also create cunning illusions, retaining all of the statistics of a real creature, but vulnerable to a Disbelieve spell from their opponents.

Up to eight wizards take turns over two phases, casting and movement. Killing a wizard eliminates them from the field of battle until just the victor remains. The plane itself influences the game, its alignment dictated by the type of magic cast, as well as by Chaos and Law spells. Each point gained from these increases the chance of casting the respective spells. For example, should Limbo become Lawful enough, it's possible to reach 100% casting chance for the uber-monster, the Golden Dragon.

THE QUALITY

Released in the summer of 1985, priced at £7.95, *Chaos* accrued decent scores, with both *Personal Computer News* and *Crash* magazine awarding it 8/10. *Sinclair User* also liked *Chaos*' fantastical wizardry, scoring it 4/5, and calling it a, "Fast moving and colourful game." That's slightly denigrating to Julian Gollop's opus, which is very far from a simple arcade game and offers an unprecedented level of depth. There were some dissenting voices. Writing in *Your Spectrum*, Roger Munford pointed readers towards the Oxford Dictionary

» [ZX Spectrum] The infamous Gooey Blob, able to transform the plane within a handful of turns.

definition of the word *Chaos*, doling out a 'MISS' to the game. The point was echoed by *Sinclair Programs* in its 66% review, yet *Chaos*' number five spot in *Your Sinclair*'s Top 100 Readers' games list of 1993 (its final issue) confirmed its place in the Spectrum's vast software catalogue. But why? Unfortunately, we can only touch upon *Chaos*' complexity in this short section. With its high level of variation and wonderful multiplayer gameplay, it's one of the Spectrum's finest strategy games, much-loved today not only by strategy fans but by fans of all genres.

WHY IT'S EXPENSIVE

When, in the early Eighties, Games Workshop moved into videogame publishing, it instigated a short but entertaining period for the company. Digitised versions of *Talisman* and *Battlecars* helped the transition, and its relationship with programmer Julian Gollop looked to have reached its zenith with *Chaos*. Alongside RPG *Journey's End*, Games Workshop took the next step, splashing out on a lavish Ultimate-style box and two-page adverts inside most of the 8-bit computing magazines. "These games sold well and put Games Workshop on the computer games map. Sadly, it wasn't quite good enough," note founders Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson in their 2022 book, *Dice Men*. Worried about the swiftly rising costs of the industry, the Games Workshop games division packed up late in 1985. It had already rereleased *Chaos* in the standard single jewel version, making the limited run of the original card big box extremely rare. Combined with its popularity today, prices across all versions continue to rise.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES

Games Workshop's own single-jewel rerelease sells for around £50-£75. Back in 1986, Firebird's newly minted budget range produced a repackaged, cut-price version, yet even that commands an impressive £30-£50 price tag. If you've got an actual Speccy and want to enjoy some magical mayhem, your cheapest bet is to look out for *Your Sinclair*'s *Smash Tape 34*, which housed the multiplayer classic. Even this goes for between £2.50 and £5.00 – a high price considering most covertapes fetch pennies. Finally, Julian's sequel, published in 1990 under his own label, is a neat upgrade, albeit very different from *Chaos*. Expect to pay around £15-£20 for a decent copy of *Lords Of Chaos*. Still not cheap for a Spectrum game, but a helluva lot less than the original release of *Chaos*.

» [ZX Spectrum] Some creatures are mountable, giving the wizard protection and mobility.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Pushed into rarity by circumstances, the initial big box release of *Chaos* is a real collector's piece and a fine game, too. With Julian Gollop fans everywhere, thanks to his continued efforts in the action strategy field, snagging this one is far from easy. It's worth the effort, though, and will look imperious on the shelf compared to its later single jewel-case incarnations. Get that wallet ready – they go quickly and expensively.

I'VE GOT IT!

The Gollop fans who've managed to cast a big box Chaos

Gary McGeechan
I was lucky enough to pick it up in an eBay bundle of about £150 [in total]. The listing didn't mention it specifically, but I saw it lurking in the back of one of the pictures. It's an amazing game, still playable now.

ZX Tetlee
It took me years of daily searches until I eventually won a Spanish eBay auction. Me and a best mate played it to death back in the day, and it led to my love of turn-based [gaming].

Michael Law
I've been obsessed with *Chaos* from the first time I loaded it up from a mate's dodgy tape. People [on Facebook group Sinclair For Sale] knew I was looking for a copy, so when it popped up, they got the seller to hold it for me. I paid £250, and it was worth every penny.

Steven Brown
I've been preserving titles on World Of Spectrum, and now Spectrum Computing, for about 30 years now. A side effect is that I've acquired a sizeable collection, and I bought my copy of *Chaos* from a fellow collector, paying about £130-£140 from memory.

Leigh Loveday
I got it on a *Your Sinclair* covertape, like most folks, I suspect. It went on to be by far the most well-used tape in my collection. I never saw the Firebird rerelease in the wild, but was very jealous of a mate at school who had the Games Workshop version.

Leigh Loveday
£1.99 off the carousel at the local video rental shop. A regular haunt if i had some money burning a hole in my pocket.

MY RETRO LIFE

PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT OUR **SHARED PASSION**

FESTIVAL FUN

David Crookes recalls a festival considered to be the 'Sundance of the videogame world'

During the summer, thousands of people stand in fields, warm beer in hand, watching bands play songs so familiar they could be sung in their sleep. I've been there, enjoying the moment as the sun sets and the crowd sways but there is one festival that sticks in the mind more than most.

It took place for a few years in Nottingham, spread over multiple days towards the end of October. Called the GameCity Festival, it was mostly free and it brought together some of the biggest names in videogaming across multiple venues, each one pulsating with enthusiastic fans. I missed the first one, in 2006, but I was there from the second day the following year and it really captured my imagination.

My primary goal was to scour the festival looking for feature angles for **Retro Gamer** as well as *Play*, *NRevolution* and the much missed *games™*. Having booked myself into the Travelodge on Maid Marion Way, I scribbled down a list of all of the events that I wanted to attend and began my GameCity journey with a talk by Jonathan Smith, head of production at Traveller's Tales.

He was demonstrating the Wii version of *Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga*, showing how the Wii Remote could be used as a lightsaber – going as far as sticky-taping a plastic lightsaber to the Wii Remote to play through a few scenes before it became too cumbersome. It was great fun and Jonathan was hugely engaging. Yet, because I'd attended alone, it felt rather lonely sitting in the Broadway Cinema and Media Centre. I began to question whether I was going to enjoy the rest of my time at the festival.

I need not have worried. If there's one thing I've discovered over the decades, it's that gamers are a friendly bunch and, if you share your passion, you've got some instant buddies. I got chatting with so many cool gamers over the course of that afternoon. I also had a lovely conversation about *Katamari Damacy* and *Noby Noby Boy* with Keita Takahashi. He spent the first few minutes of our meeting doodling on a piece of A4 paper. "A new game in the making?", I asked. "It has no meaning," he laughed. His creativity and laid-back nature was inspiring.

GameCity felt like a voyage of discovery and it brought gaming to life. I loved the evenings scoffing curry at Mogal E Azam with my new-found friends while Simon Byron, Ste Curran and Dave McCarthy provided the entertainment. I adored exploring Indiecade and meeting the minds behind titles such as the politically charged *Escape From Woomera* and Jessica Mak's *Everyday Shooter* with its unique music.

I also got to meet *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov, watched the documentary *Tetris: From Russia With Love* and saw James Clewett's *Tetris* record attempt.

> "Ambitious and made great use of the city's facilities"
> **DAVID CROOKES**

I left Nottingham on a high and I badgered the press office and GameCity director Iain Simons for the dates of the next one, booking the Travelodge again. I attended each year until 2012 and made even more friends and had even better times.

There were some wonderful breakfasts hosted by journalist Keith Stuart and a panel of game experts. There were many great talks too, some accompanied by more delicious curries. Martin Hollis and David Doak played *Goldeneye 64* live during a director commentary session. David Braben and Ian Bell celebrated the 25th anniversary of *Elite*.

So much stuff still sticks in my mind like the time ace PR specialist Alison Beasley asked if I fancied talking to Feargal Sharkey in the pub across the road. Without wishing to look like a fool, I wracked my brain trying to work out who he was – the only Feargal Sharkey I knew of was the local vocalist of the punk band the Undertones. It turned out it was him and he wanted the games industry to learn from the music sector's battle with the move to digital distribution.

This was a festival which encouraged Takahashi to create a physical children's playground in Nottingham and kickstarted a national videogame preservation effort. It was so ambitious and made great use of the city's facilities. One year, many of the events were even held in the legendary Gatecrasher superclub. I'd dance for joy if GameCity was ever to make a return. ✱

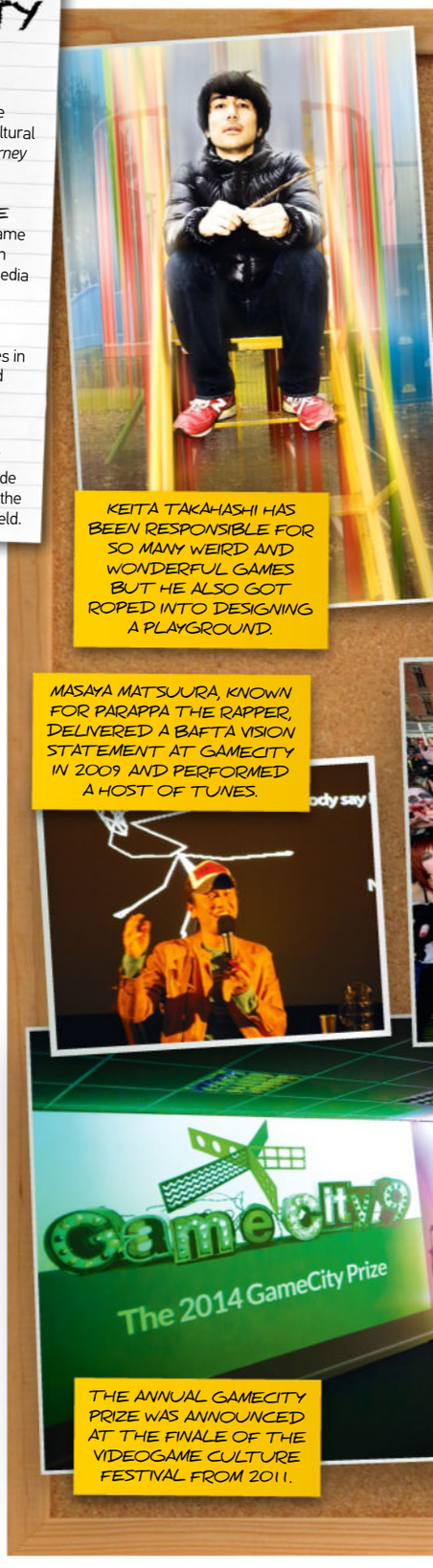
GREAT GAMECITY ACHIEVEMENTS

GAMECITY PRIZE
Once described as "gaming's answer to the Bookers", the GameCity Prize celebrated the cultural achievement of games. Winners included *Journey* and *Papers, Please*.

NATIONAL VIDEOGAME ARCHIVE
Launched in 2008, the UK's first official videogame archive was set up as a partnership between Nottingham Trent University and the National Media Museum in Bradford.

WORLD RECORDS
GameCity set a world record for dancing zombies in 2008 when 1,227 people writhed to the sound of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in Nottingham's Old Market Square.

NATIONAL VIDEOGAME ARCADE
GameCity opened the National Videogame Arcade in Nottingham in 2015 which effectively replaced the festivals. It closed in 2018 but re-opened in Sheffield.


KEITA TAKAHASHI HAS BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR SO MANY WEIRD AND WONDERFUL GAMES BUT HE ALSO GOT ROPED INTO DESIGNING A PLAYGROUND.
MASAYA MATSUURA, KNOWN FOR PARAPPA THE RAPPER, DELIVERED A BAFTA VISION STATEMENT AT GAMECITY IN 2009 AND PERFORMED A HOST OF TUNES.
GameCity
The 2014 GameCity Prize
THE ANNUAL GAMECITY PRIZE WAS ANNOUNCED AT THE FINALE OF THE VIDEOGAME CULTURE FESTIVAL FROM 2011.

FESTIVALS ARE ALL ABOUT PEOPLE AND GAMECITY WAS STEERED SO WELL BY IAIN SIMONS WHO WORKED AS A PRINCIPAL LECTURER AT NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY AT THE TIME.
VIDEOGAME COMPOSER JAMES HANNIGAN PERFORMED A LIVE CONCERT AT ST MARY'S CHURCH.
ONELIFELEFT IS A VIDEOGAME RADIO SHOW PRESENTED BY STE CURRAN AND SIMON BYRON. THERE WERE LIVE BROADCASTS DURING GAMECITY IN 2007.
THE FESTIVAL LOOKED TO GET AS MANY PEOPLE INVOLVED AS POSSIBLE HENCE SOME COOL WORLD RECORD ATTEMPTS.
EVEN ON A DRAB DAY IN NOTTINGHAM, THE CITY'S SPIRITS WERE LIFTED BY THE PRESENCE OF THIS AMAZING FESTIVAL.
SONIC WAS ON HAND TO LAUNCH GAMECITY SQUARED – THE FOURTH FESTIVAL IN 2009.
A LARGE GAME OF PAC-MAN WAS PLAYED IN THE STREETS OF NOTTINGHAM IN 2010.

All photos credited to GameCity

BEST IN SHOW

Readers share their favourite game events

Skyblaze
Summer Of Sonic. All of them. Everyone has a go at *Sonic* fandom for being fractious, but those events were outpourings of love and joy. And we got to see Crush 40 play live in the UK for the first time.

Paul Terry
I used to love my annual trip to the CES in London back in the Nineties, at least until I had my CD32 that I bought there pinched off me in KFC on Oxford Street after the show. Otherwise great times. Came home with loads of freebies and got to play plenty of demos.

Rhubarb
I went to a preview event for *Bloodborne* and I was the only one in attendance to defeat the Cleric Beast first try. I was very smug about it.

Ross
Revival 2014 was very memorable and unmemorable. I got to meet John and Brenda Romero, but didn't really know what to say. I got quite drunk after that.

Psi/Ben
It's quite easily any Glesgames for me, the local multiplayer videogame event that has been going for over ten years now. Tons of CRTs and modern tellies, lots of consoles and plenty of peripherals too for all the best multiplayer experiences with a wonderful crowd of people. Always a magical night.

Robert August de Meijer
My first fighting game tournament at ForeGames Tilburg in 2001. I placed fifth in *Capcom Vs SNK 2* and a career was started!

Sammy Barker
Tokyo Games Show 23 was a real wow moment for me. First time in Japan and the convention was just getting back into its groove again. Massive booths and just a totally different vibe to the Western shows.

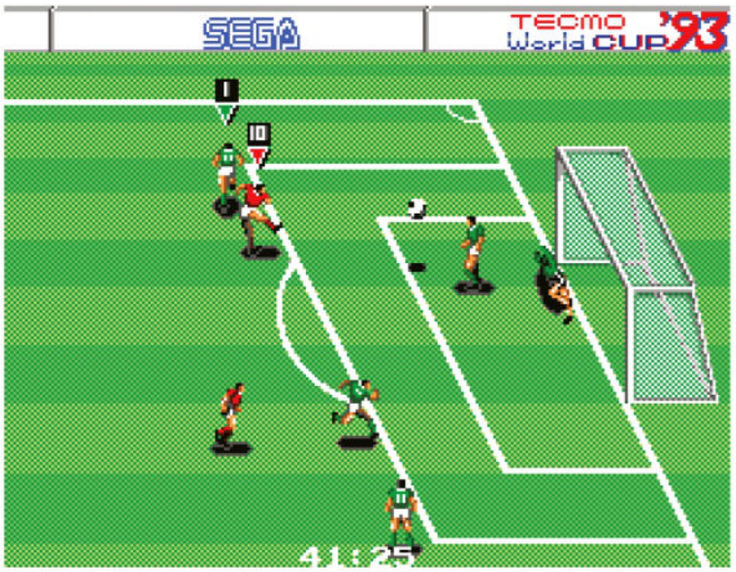
Sammy Barker
The first Play Expo (or R3play as it was then) in 2010. My first time seeing so many systems in the flesh that I'd only read about previously like the Sam Coupé and Vectrex. For those five hours, I was the kid in the candy store.

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a copy of one of our classic retro books from our archives. Good luck everyone!



» [Master System] Like Martyn, Lee Donel is a big fan of *Tecmo World Cup 93*.

STAR LETTER

I WII-LY WANT THIS

Hi **Retro Gamer** team,
This year marks the 20th anniversary of Nintendo's Wii and I feel that you absolutely have to put it on the cover of the magazine. I really adored this console on release, not just because it felt so different to its rivals, but because of the Virtual Console. The ability to download digital games from a variety of classic consoles was excellent and it led to me discovering all sorts of goodies, from *Sin & Punishment* to *Super Star Soldier* and *Alien Soldier* (yes, I like shooting games). I know that the other consoles were doing retro games on their digital stores as well, but it felt like a more natural fit on the Wii and there were so many more games to choose from.

I know some didn't like its 'waggle' controls, the fact that it was vastly underpowered compared to the PS3 and Xbox 360, and that its online capabilities weren't the best, but it's genuinely one of my favourite systems of all time and I really hope you give it the coverage it deserves.
Yours hopefully,
Henry Matthews

Don't worry Henry, we've not forgotten Nintendo's console. We've already put the Xbox 360 on the cover, so it's only fair we cover the Wii and PS3 at some point as well. Have a book while you wait.

» [Mega Drive] Over 420 games appeared on Nintendo's Virtual Console service, including classics like *Sonic The Hedgehog*.

GO UNDERDOGS!

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I've been a subscriber now for about six months, but I have been buying the magazine on and off for many years. It's my first time writing in, so I just wanted to say thank you for all the hard work you do. What triggered me to write this email was the 'underdog football games' article written by Martyn in your latest edition. I think I'd played or heard of a few of the titles mentioned over the years, but what struck me was Martyn saying that *Tecmo World Cup 93* was "easily the system's best football game". I must have sunk hundreds of hours into this game, and I loved it. However, I think it's fair to say the critics in general gave this very poor reviews on release, but I remember thinking how amazing it looked when I was flicking through my friend's *SMS Power!* mag at the time. I never regretted my purchase.

So thank you, Martyn, I always thought I was on my own in my opinion of this game's quality. All the best for the future, guys, and keep up the good work.
Kind Regards,
Lee Donel

We're glad you enjoyed the feature, Lee. Martyn is a big footy fan, so don't be surprised if a few more football-related articles appear in future issues.

BATMAN RETURNS

Hi team,
When I finished reading issue 284, I saw that the next issue would feature the Dark Knight himself: Batman! But when I picked up issue 285 from the mail, guess who it was? The *Star Wars* crew! Damn, did I miss an issue? How? Why? I went online to check my subscription, raging at my computer while trying to find the missing issue, but then… wait a minute! I didn't miss one at all. I simply misread the announcement in #284 – it was an Ultimate Guide to *Batman*. What a relief!
On a different note, I wanted to express my sincere condolences to the team regarding the passing of Nick. I haven't reached out before, but every time I open a **Retro Gamer** issue since his passing, I think of you all.
Best,
Gaëtan (France)

Thanks for the kind words about Nick, Gaëtan. Seeing you like the Dark Knight you've probably already read Darran's take on *Arkham Asylum* in issue 286. We really hope you enjoyed it.

» Although *Batman* didn't make the cover, we hope it didn't stop Gaëtan from enjoying the article.

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» Although we don't have an official podcast, Darran occasionally appears on shows like Retro Asylum.

PODCAST PONDERING

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Is there any reason you don't have an official podcast? It's an incredibly popular format nowadays and it seems like **Retro Gamer** would be a perfect fit, as you could talk about magazine production and interview developers. There could be a segment looking at what the team is playing, future articles that would be appearing in the mag and guest appearances from your columnists. Anyway, I'm just putting it out there as I'm surprised it's not something you've explored.
Duncan James

A long time ago we used to upload old interviews on our official website, but they're no longer available. While a podcast does make perfect sense, it's finding the time to create it, and unfortunately, that's not something we have a lot of. If we can find a way to make it work we'd definitely consider it.

UNFINISHED SYMPHONY

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I enjoyed Darran's short retrospective look at *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night* and it made me think of something: why doesn't Konami remake it? I too have been playing the game via emulation and it still holds up brilliantly. The level design is phenomenal, the score is truly superb and some of the boss battles are extremely satisfying. M2 has a long history with the series, both in terms of remaking past games and its excellent spin-off *Castlevania: Rebirth*, so I'd love to see how they would tackle it. I'm pretty sure plenty of other fans would like a remake of the game as well.
Keep up the great work,
Paul Bainbridge

» [Wii] *Castlevania: Rebirth* was excellent, so we'd love M2 to take a crack at *Symphony Of The Night* (pun fully intended).

You're right, M2 would be a fantastic choice, Paul. It's already remade two *Castlevania* games, so we're sure that a third would be possible.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

A year of the Switch 2

The Switch 2 has been on sale for a year now, and the team have been sharing their thoughts. Both Martyn and Darran like the framerate upgrades it offers on classic Switch games, but feel there aren't enough essential exclusives on the system just yet. Martyn is impressed with developers like Capcom putting out big AAA games on it, while Darran has still been enjoying *Donkey Kong Bananza* and the *Arcade Archives 2* range.

Your say

» [PC] *Assassin's Creed II* remains extremely popular with Retro Gamer readers.

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Assassin's Creed game?

Jason
II is probably my favourite, but I loved *Valhalla* as it has all these old English places and one of them is near my house.

Luke The Fox VA
Black Flag. I only got it because it's a great pirate simulator, singing shanties on the high seas.

MYST & Co
I'm probably in the minority, but the first one! Some people say it's aged poorly but I played it for the first time nine years after it released and loved it for what it is. I've played other *AC* games but never really enjoyed them in the same way, in all honesty.

Antony Longmore
It's gotta be *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. I loved the entire Ezio trilogy but *Brotherhood*'s ending was a genuine jaw-dropping moment for me at the time. I also enjoyed the multiplayer mode that made its debut in this game.

MegaApple
I played through all of *Assassin's Creed III* last year with the game on one screen and Wikipedia on another. It was a fun way to learn history while playing. Even though it's flawed, it has its heart where it counts.

Aake Kinnunen
The last time I was so angry that I had to stop playing and go to bed was with *Assassin's Creed II*. I was quite worried before the launch about the feature creep, but it just sort of worked and the game was really good, polishing most of the *AC1* nonsense. Plus the setting and cheeky Ezio.

40oz Gorilla
Assassin's Creed Origins. In the incredible backdrop of Egypt in decline, Bayek's sadness at the loss of his son and journey of revenge feels so much more personal than the other protagonists of the series.

Michael Loukoumis
AC II for me, the scope and intrigue of the story really hooked me. And I really loved the current-day stuff! The series ended at *Revelations* for me – it's not been the same since.

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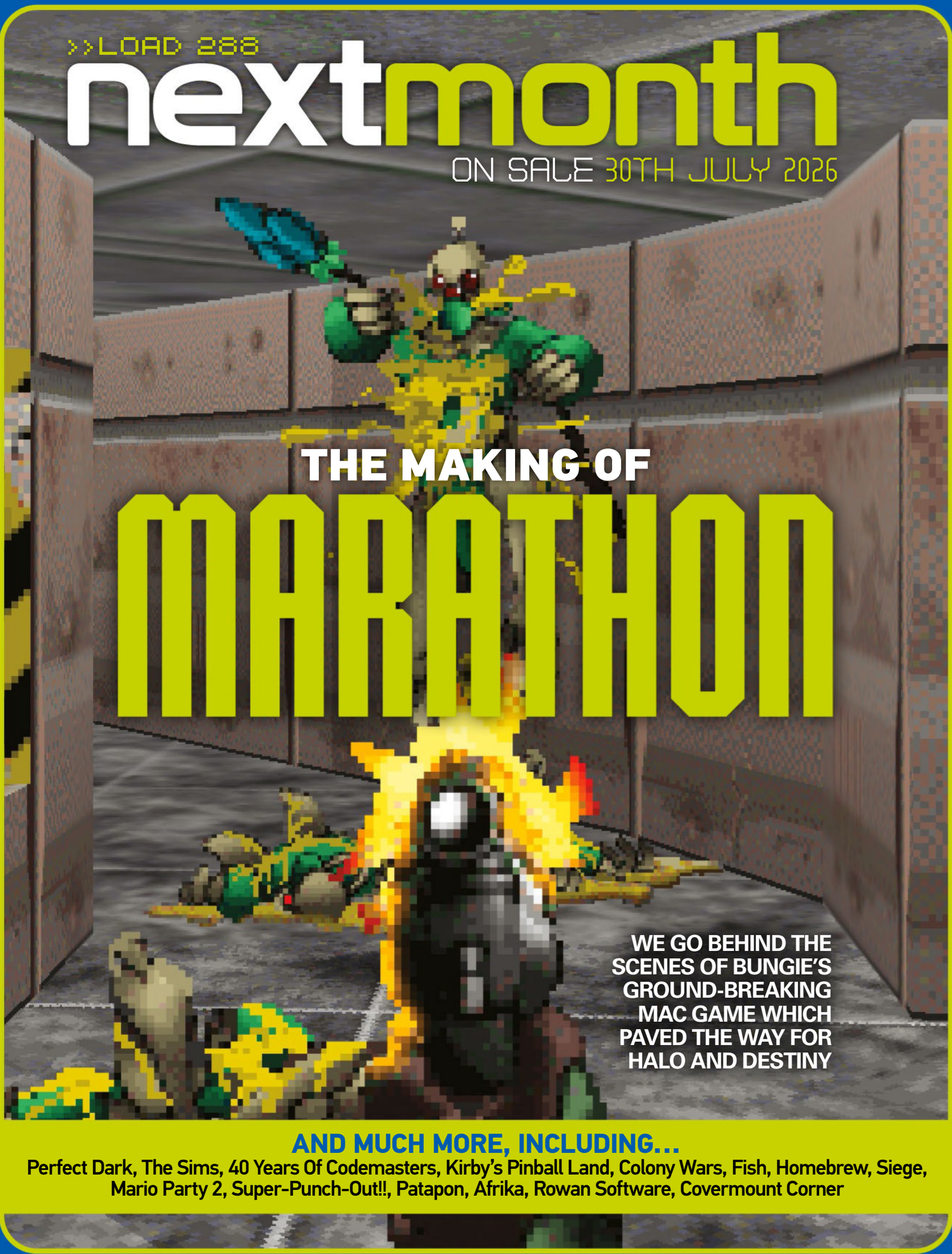
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Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures

THEY GROW UP SO FAST

» XBOX 360 » 2008 » TRAVELLER'S TALES

While my daughters have both been brought up with videogames, my youngest daughter Alice is far more of a gamer than her elder sister Emily. That's not to say Emily doesn't go on the occasional *Pokémon* binge or seek out old PlayStation 2 games to play, it's just that Alice throws herself into games in a similar way to me.

A while back she discovered that the first *Lego Indiana Jones* was backwards compatible on the Xbox Series X and for about a week we both spent our lunchtimes playing through the game, typically finishing a level with each session. We didn't manage to complete it, but it was a lot of fun and reminded me that I have a far higher tolerance for *Lego* games when they're based on a franchise I'm actually interested in.

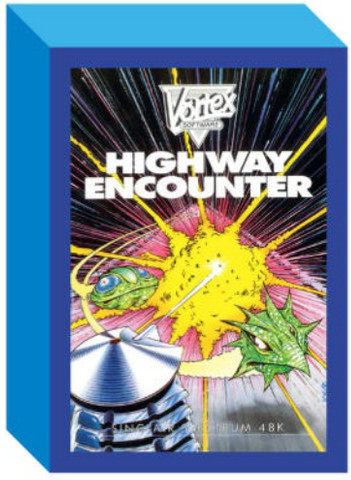
Alice and Emily have always enjoyed playing *Lego* games and playing through the first few stages of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* reminded me of when the girls would happily play a *Lego* game together, Emily patiently helping out Alice whenever she got stuck (which was often) and laughing together at the on-screen antics of their characters. Fast-forward to today, and it's Alice who is now giving prompts and advice to me.

For some reason I really struggled to get back into *The Original Adventures*, I found the character switching clumsy and I often couldn't work out where we were supposed to be going, even though I've seen the films countless times. Alice had no issues though and she was coaxing me along, laughing whenever I fell off a platform or shouting out, "Cool story, bro," whenever I mentioned an element of the game that was similar or different to the actual film.

Coming from a one-parent family, I didn't get to play games with my dad, so I always try and make the effort with the girls, even now. Videogames are a huge part of my DNA and I love the fact that I've not only passed that part of me to Emily and Alice, but that I still get as much satisfaction playing with them now as I did when they were kids.

0
ess Y to switch to another

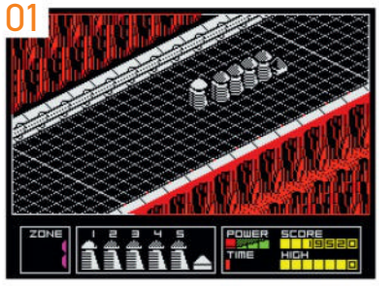
ENDGAME



HIGHWAY ENCOUNTER
(1985, ZX SPECTRUM)

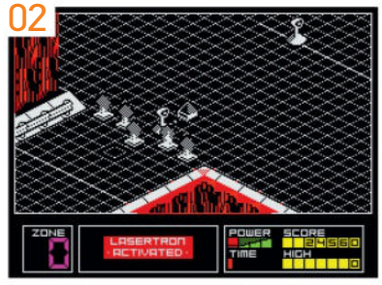
» Aliens have invaded Earth and established a stronghold at the end of a highway. Using your five Vortons you must clear a path through the alien fortifications and deliver the devastating Lasertron weapon to its intended target – the alien mother ship

01



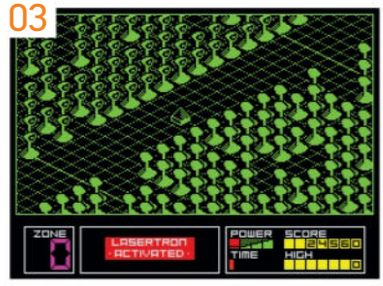
» Having traversed 30 screens – or zones – you reach the end of this highway to hell. In addition, you've done so before the timer runs down. Look at that tiny smidgen of time left! Man, Eighties games were not easy rides.

02



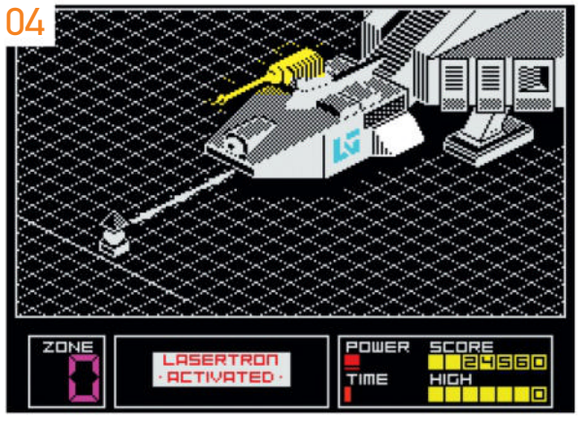
» Their purpose served, the Vortons self-destruct, leaving just the Lasertron to fulfil its mission to save the Earth. The weapon activates and slips through the final barrier, heading to the mother ship just ahead.

03



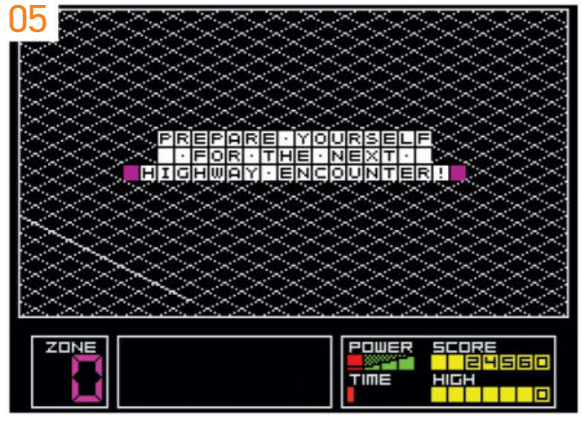
» Ranks of sentient green aliens watch on as the deadly payload advances towards their nerve centre. The device is silent, not even beeping to signal the imminent arrival of fireworks. Their invasion of the planet is about to end.

04

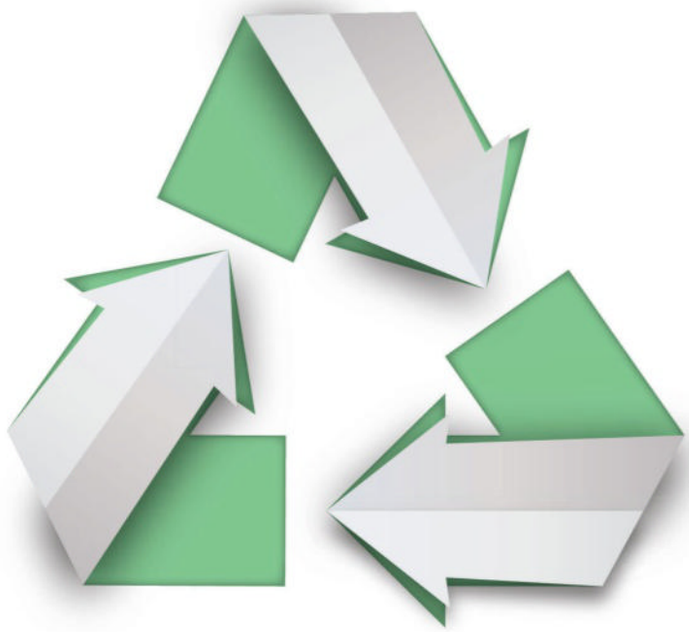


» BOOM! The deceptively small Lasertron unfurls and delivers a searing bolt of energy directly into the mother ship's front grill. Such is its power, the ship is vaporised to nothing in a few seconds. The Lasertron detonates. Its work here is done.

05



» However, yours isn't. The end message can be read two ways: it's either letting you know that the game is about to loop back to the beginning, or maybe it's teasing the sequel that would arrive from Vortex the following year – *Alien Highway: Encounter 2*.



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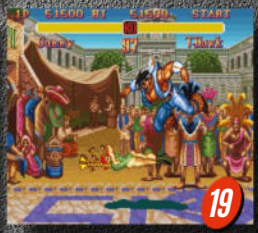
THE MINI SNES COMPANION

retro GAMER

THE MINI SNES COMPANION

Many gamers consider the Super Nintendo to be one of the best consoles of its era and it's easy to see why. It featured revolutionary games like *Super Mario World*, *Donkey Kong Country*, *Chrono Trigger* and *Super Mario Kart*, offered fantastic visuals via its use of Mode 7 and boasted a sound chip that delivered some of the best gaming soundtracks of all time.

With that in mind we've selected some of the greatest games to have graced Nintendo's acclaimed console, from killer RPGs like *Terrangima*, *EarthBound* and *Final Fantasy VI* to evergreen classics like *Starwing*, *Super Metroid* and *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past*. You'll even find a few curveballs thrown in that we're particularly fond of such as *Pieces*, *Actraiser* and *The Firemen*. Whether you're just getting into Nintendo's 16-bit console for the first time, or are a longtime supporter of the machine, you'll find plenty of great games to enhance your collection.



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THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST

» [SNES] Link receives some rest and recuperation inside a handy fairy cave.

1991 · THE LEGEND LIVES ON

Eschewing the 2D platforming approach adopted by the second game, *A Link To The Past* wisely returns to the classic top-down view of the original – only now the power of the SNES transforms the often-barren Hyrule into a beautiful world that quickly feels like home. The game introduces many items that would go on to define the series, such as the Hookshot, Pegasus Boots and, of course, the Master Sword. It adds Link's deadly spin attack and splits up Heart Containers into fragments that are tucked away in hard-to-find places. By far the most important change, though, is the introduction of a parallel world, requiring Link to flip between light and dark worlds multiple times in order to defeat the evil Ganon. A sequel, *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*, debuted on the 3DS in 2013.

BRINGING ZELDA TO THE SNES

DIRECTOR TAKASHI TEZUKA RECALLS THE WORK THAT WENT INTO CREATING A LINK TO THE PAST

Why did you choose to return to the top-down style of the original* Legend Of Zelda*?

In *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link*, we wanted to include sword combat with a variety of different moves into the gameplay, and so decided the project would use a side-scrolling view that made use of our experience from the *Super Mario* games. But then with the next *Zelda* for the SNES, we were able to add even more new things to the gameplay. We decided to have two worlds; one light, one dark. We felt the best way to represent this overlap of light and dark, and to represent the changes between them, was to use the same slanted top-down view used in the original *The Legend Of Zelda* game.

What possibilities did the SNES offer the development team?

The new hardware allowed us to do things we hadn't been able to until that point. I'd only been drawing four-colour pixel images up until then, so even simply increasing the number of colours available to use to 16 or 256 colours, as well as being able to use high-quality sounds, was really exciting for me.

How did you approach Link's use of items and weaponry in the game?

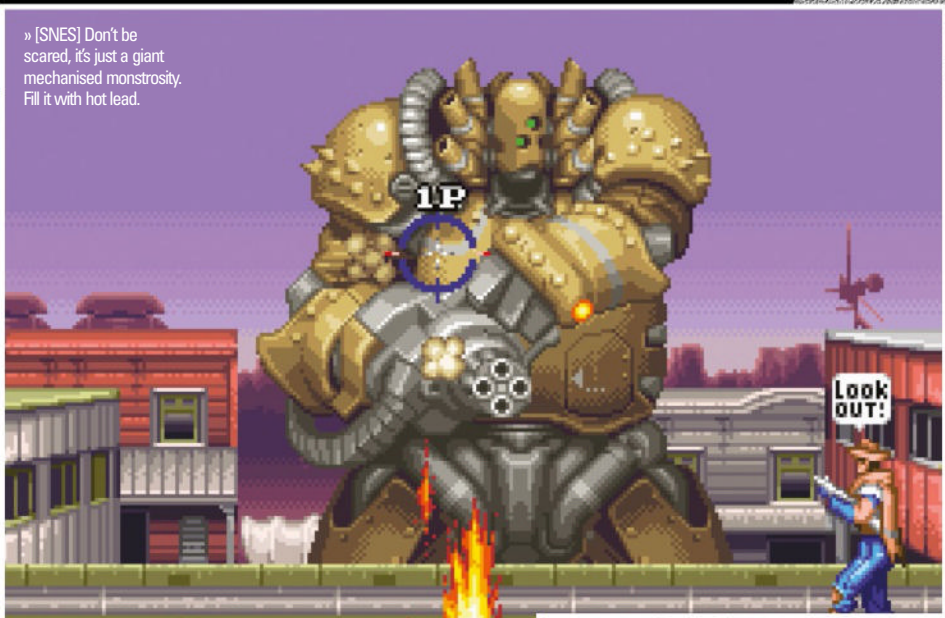
We wanted players to be able to freely choose which weapons to hold, not just the sword and shield. We also thought about having these weapons combine – say, for example, having the bow and arrows set to the A button and a bomb to B button so that when you use them together, Link would shoot an arrow with a bomb attached. In the end we didn't use this in *A Link To The Past*, as Shigeru Miyamoto requested that Link always have the sword equipped. We were able to implement this system in the next title, *Link's Awakening*, though.

What can you tell us about the Master Sword and its memorable introduction scene?

The game's script writer, Kensuke Tanabe, already had an idea for a truly memorable hero-awakening scene when we started this project. In the midst of a forest, with light filtering down through the leaves, the sword stands waiting for someone worthy of wielding it to arrive. Link draws the sword out as the light trickles through the leaves. From the moment Link pulls the sword out, it recognises him as a hero, and grants him its power. Our main aim was to show the birth of a hero and overlap this with a sense of achievement for the player, that they have been recognised as a hero after having overcome many challenges. We also decided then that the Master Sword was a sword that alone holds the power to repel evil, and I suspect this is why it continues to carry such an important role in the rest of the series.

The game has stood the test of time and continues to attract new fans today. You must be delighted with its enduring acclaim.

We're truly thankful, and consider it a great privilege. At the same time, it also drives us to create new games that will surpass this acclaim.



» [SNES] Don't be scared, it's just a giant mechanised monstrosity. Fill it with hot lead.

WILD GUNS

1994 · A WEST WILL SMITH WOULD BE PROUD OF

This excellent shooter plays like a cross between *Cabal* and *NAM-1975,* but has a setting that mixes cowboys with gargantuan robots to great effect. Holding down the fire button moves your on-screen cursor about, while releasing it allows your hero to dodge any incoming bullets that head your way. It's a brilliantly simple system but is executed with panache, while your trailing cursor can destroy the scenery as well as the game's many enemies. Created by Natsume, *Wild Guns* is a fast and furiously paced game with excellent visuals, a great collection of power-ups and some truly immense opponents to take down. It's certainly not the easiest of games, so make sure you tackle it with a friend. Hideously expensive, it's best to seek out the rerelease by Strictly Limited Games or buy the remake, which adds enhanced visuals and two new characters.

» [SNES] You can cause an immense amount of damage in *Wild Guns*, and even more when playing with a friend.

ACTRAISER

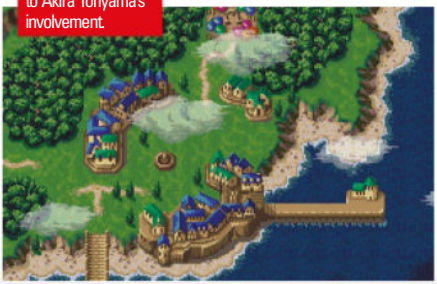
1990 · WHERE SIM AND ACTION COLLIDE

***ActRaiser* is a game of two halves and both are very good indeed.** One takes the form of a simplistic but thoroughly entertaining god sim, in which you must build houses, keep your villagers happy and seal away the lairs of dangerous monsters. You do this via a cute Cherub who comes armed with an endless supply of arrows and also offers advice throughout your epic quest.

The other side of *ActRaiser* is an exhilarating 2D hack-'em-up that pits you against some insanely tough bosses and trickily designed levels. Admittedly, the combat mechanics in these sections are pretty simple, but there's a great variety to the enemy designs and some really ace boss battles. It's all held together by a truly spectacular score and a brisk pace. The sim aspects were sadly dropped for the disappointing 1993 sequel, while a remake in 2021 called *Actraiser Renaissance* further changed the game's mechanics.

» [SNES] Some of *ActRaiser*'s bosses look superb, and this Ice Wyvern is no exception.

» [SNES] If *Crono*'s spiky-haired look reminds you of *Dragon Quest* and Dragon Ball, it's due to Akira Toriyama's involvement.



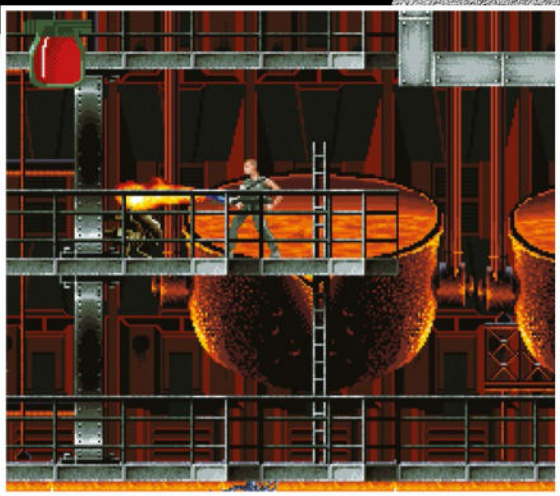
CHRONO TRIGGER

1995 · A TIME-SPANNING EPIC

Square's time-travelling RPG is generally considered to be one of the system's best and now commands a pretty penny. Designed by Yuji Horii, Hironobu Sakaguchi and Akira Toriyama, it's a thrilling tale that focuses on six playable protagonists who have to continually travel across time. *Chrono Trigger* utilises an enhanced version of the Active Battle System seen in Square's *Final Fantasy* games, boasts 13 unique endings and has a host of allies and side quests to discover. Graphically impressive and with a spectacular score, it's easy to see why the game is so acclaimed. Its popularity meant it was rereleased several times, starting off with the PlayStation and eventually receiving a greatly enhanced update for the DS. The most recent game in the *Chrono* series is *Chrono Cross: Radical Dreamers Edition*, which is a 2022 update of the 1999 PlayStation game.

ALIEN 3

1993 · THREE TIMES THE TERROR



It shares little in common with the movie, but this remains an exceptionally atmospheric *Alien* game. Visually it's gorgeous, the playing area is huge and sprawling, and there's a large amount of varied missions to complete, many of which can be tackled in any order. It's a world away from the Mega Drive game and far better as a result, having much more depth in its gameplay.

F-ZERO

1990 · HEY, SPEED FREAKS

Launching alongside the SNES in all regions, this spectacular racer set in the 26th century was overseen by Shigeru Miyamoto. It uses the console's Mode 7 to deliver an astonishing sense of speed that few other games of the era could match. While the early difficulty levels may seem tame, ramping up to Expert or the secret Master difficulty delivers an incredibly challenging racer that still works wonders for your hand-to-eye coordination.

NHL '94

1993 · POWER PLAY

EA didn't have the best reputation when it came to porting its games to the SNES. Fortunately, it pulled out all the stops for *NHL '94*, delivering fast-paced gameplay, tight controls and an extremely slick graphic engine. There is a large number of gameplay modes, including a shoot-out minigame, and it introduces the excellent 'one-timer' play mechanic. It was another annual update, but it added 25 new features compared to the previous edition.

SIM CITY

1991 · IF YOU BUILD IT

Nintendo licensed the beloved world-builder *Sim City* from developer Maxis and added its own unique spin in the process. The game is overseen by the enigmatic Dr Wright (who resembles original designer Will Wright), the stomping Godzilla is replaced by Bowser, and the number of special buildings the player can receive has been greatly increased. Furthermore, there are two new scenarios that are exclusive to the SNES, making this a special treat for Nintendo owners.

SUPER PUNCH-OUT!!

1994 · READY TO RUMBLE

The power of the SNES enabled Nintendo to create some truly expressive boxers for its sequel. Little Mac builds power by unleashing a flurry of punches and uppercuts while reading his opponent's cues and delivering the relevant counterattack. Special moves are available once the power bar is filled, hopefully allowing Little Mac to down the 16 progressively difficult fighters. It's a fun action game where perhaps the only thing missing is a two-player mode.

TETRIS ATTACK

1995 · LEAGUES AHEAD

Despite its name, this has nothing to do with *Tetris* (although it is a puzzle game with similar compulsive qualities). In fact, it was released in Japan as *Panel De Pon*, which was the first title in the *Puzzle League* series. What we have is a slick variation on the 'Match 3' game with an array of different game modes to choose from, including a maddeningly addictive Versus mode. The latest version was released for the 3DS in 2016.

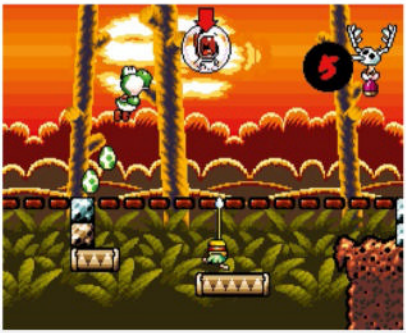
» [SNES] Yoshi's adept at flinging eggs so aim for this Nep-Enut's giant gob.

» [SNES] The more you roll this snowball, the bigger it gets. Use it to crush annoying foes.

SUPER MARIO WORLD 2: YOSHI'S ISLAND

1995 · MARIO'S MOUNT STEPS UP

Interestingly, the *Super Mario World* prefix was added to the Western releases of this game, probably to encourage better sales. In fact, it has very little in common with its namesake, with Yoshi guiding baby Mario through some beautiful environments that are packed with collectibles. That's not to say *Yoshi's Island* isn't a brilliant game, though. Keeping baby Mario safe becomes increasingly trickier as the game continues, it's full of imaginative bosses, and makes exceptional use of the Super FX 2 chip. Even now it remains Yoshi's best standalone game and shows Nintendo at its creative best.



MARIO'S EGGSHELLENT SEQUEL

TAKASHI TEZUKA AND SHIGEFUMI HINO ON FOLLOWING SUPER MARIO WORLD

Why focus on Yoshi?

Takashi Tezuka: We felt we'd done everything we wanted to for side-scrolling with *Super Mario World*, and so wanted to try creating a platformer with a different angle to it. Before *Yoshi's Island*, we'd only created games with Mario as the lead character. We felt that changing the lead character would give us a different perspective and different gameplay possibilities, and so we started thinking up a game with Yoshi as the lead.

How did you settle on Yoshi's distinct visual look?

Shigefumi Hino: Although there were some people in the company who were expecting us to follow *Donkey Kong Country*, a decision was taken that we should put our weight behind a completely different sort of visual look. It was around about the time that we decided on that direction that Mr joined the company as a designer. As we were competing together and having fun coming up with different designs, we slowly settled on the feel we wanted the visuals to have.

Why use the Super FX 2 chip?

TT: We were very excited and decided to make use of it for two reasons: the first was that as software developers we wanted to use all new technology we could, and the other point was that this technology offered further gameplay and visual possibilities – eg object (sprite) rotation and a large increase in the number of screen colours possible.

Why does Yoshi's Island remain so popular?

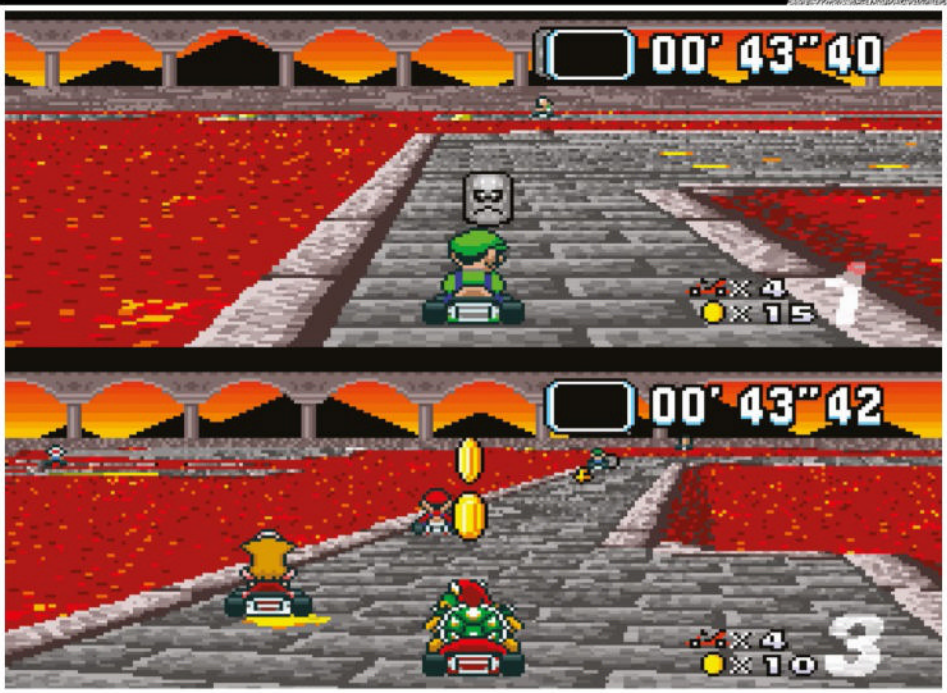
SH: It wasn't easy creating Yoshi or *Yoshi's Island*. We competed in the team to see what were the most amusing or fun things we could draw, and laughed together as we thought up strange enemies and level features, knowing we had a bit more freedom to do so because it wasn't a *Mario* game. I think the fondness people have for the character and the game is because we managed to give form to all this passion we had.

EARTHBOUND

1994 · THIS RPG IS A NESS-CESSITY

While it's not worth the hefty price tag it currently commands, there's no denying *EarthBound* is a genuinely incredible RPG and one of the most interesting to be found on Nintendo's 16-bit console. Created by Ape Inc, it has a distinctive visual style and setting that immediately sets it apart from similar games, along with an excellent combat system and the ability to earn money from battles, which must then be withdrawn from an ATM. Fortunately, *EarthBound* is now available on systems like the SNES Mini and Nintendo's Switch Online service, meaning it's easier than ever to appreciate this outstanding RPG.

» [SNES] We'd imagine most Westerners' brush with *EarthBound* was when Ness appeared in *Super Smash Bros.*

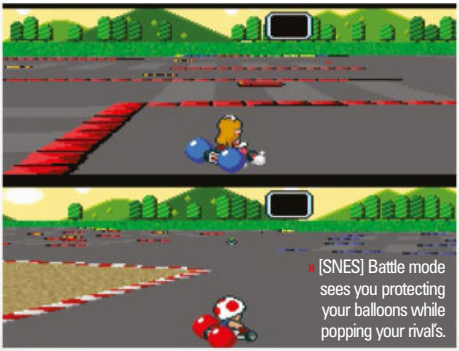


» [SNES] It's crazy to think that *Mario Kart* started life as a two-player *F-Zero* game.

SUPER MARIO KART

1992 · WHEN MARIO WENT RACING

If you need any further proof of Mario's sheer versatility, look at what happened when he decided to go karting with his mates. *Super Mario Kart* highlighted that there was far more to Nintendo's mascot than platforming alone. The racecourses are exceptionally well designed and based on a number of popular Mario locations, the AI pushes you constantly, while each competitor feels suitably different to play, meaning Nintendo's game is packed with longevity. It's also notable for an excellent Battle mode in which you have to destroy each other's balloons, which, for some, has never been beaten. And let's not forget the worryingly addictive Time Trial mode which still proves to be a horrendously deep time sink.



» [SNES] Battle mode sees you protecting your balloons while popping your rival's.

OFF TO THE RACES

SHIGERU MIYAMOTO ON HOW NINTENDO MADE SUPER MARIO KART

Why did you decide to place Mario characters in karts?

The setting for *Mario* is in any case like a comic, where in each story the characters appear in different roles. Mario appearing in lots of different kinds of games is also in line with comic tradition. With this in mind, I had absolutely no objections with enemy characters racing against rivals or characters that you can control yourself.

Why implement elements of the platform games in* Super Mario Kart*?

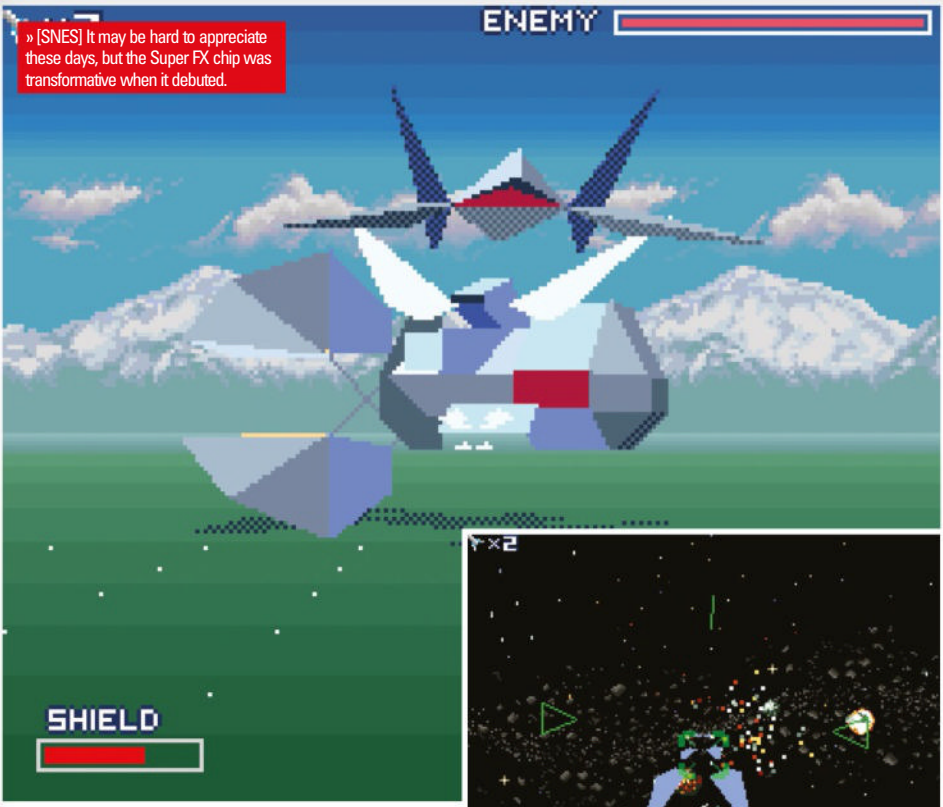
This is a feature that wouldn't be possible in a normal racing game. It seemed like it would be fun to actually place them on the course. I remember that we also made it so you could jump because this was a feature that couldn't be missing from a *Mario* game.

What was the reason for using karts?

When we decided that we would be making *Mario Kart* as a racing game, I thought that we shouldn't make a normal car-racing game, but instead create something based around the fun of competing for position, using karts as the medium. It was a natural development that we would use items so that players who aren't as good could still have a chance to win, or that players who were behind could have something to give them a helping hand.

What was the reasoning for adding the game's Battle mode?

I wanted to create it as a game that works properly with two players. These players could then battle against each other just like in *Mario Bros.*



» [SNES] It may be hard to appreciate these days, but the Super FX chip was transformative when it debuted.

STARWING

1993 · OUTFOXING THE COMPETITION

This was the first SNES game to showcase the Super FX chip that was developed by Argonaut Software and enabled the console to display 3D polygonal graphics. Piloting Fox McCloud's ship, you're able to flick between first- and third-person perspectives as you navigate a variety of hostile environments, blasting enemies and dealing with imposing bosses. Thrusters and retro rockets control your speed, allowing a degree of manoeuvrability that sets the game apart from similar rail shooters. A SNES sequel was completed in 1995 but it wouldn't be officially released until 2017.

» [SNES] Fox's crew members are always around to offer helpful advice.

UNLOCKING A NEW DIMENSION

ARGONAUT'S JEZ SAN REVEALS THE STORY BEHIND STARWING

Where did the idea for the Super FX chip come from?

I suggested the idea that while developing 3D games for Nintendo we might be able to design a 3D chip that would make its game console the first one capable of doing proper 3D graphics. Nintendo jumped at the chance and financed the creation of the MARIO (Mathematical Argonaut Rotation I/0) chip, which was designed by Rob Macaulay and Ben Cheese, and later renamed Super FX.

What was it like working with Shigeru Miyamoto on Starwing?

I have enormous respect for his talents. He's an amazing guy, and very humble. But the way he likes to work takes a lot of getting used to. He doesn't like to design games in advance. He subscribes to the 'try something, then keep tuning, then try something else' approach.

How were development duties split between Argonaut and Nintendo?

We did most of the programming and all of the technology, and Nintendo did most of the design. They also did all of the characters. It was largely Nintendo's staff that designed the stages and levels, but with help from our programmers, who created the scripting system and showed them examples as to what could be done

What did Argonaut learn from working so closely with Nintendo?

Nintendo taught us a lot about how to make mass-market games, how to introduce characters, how to worry about control systems more than graphics, and how to approach the whole game-tuning philosophy.

» [SNES] Chests can appear in all sorts of places, so make sure you seek them out whenever you can.

SUPER GHOULS 'N GHOSTS

1991 · THE BOXER SHORTS ARE BACK

***Ghouls 'N Ghosts* was converted to multiple platforms, including a memorable version for the Mega Drive, but it never reached the SNES.** Instead, Capcom decided to develop an exclusive sequel for the console that added an exceptionally good soundtrack and some sensational visuals (witness the ground quaking and spitting out coffins in the opening graveyard stage). Arthur can no longer shoot upwards, which is a shame, although he is blessed with the all-important double-jump, which changes the gameplay in the process. But note: this new move does not make the game any easier. The difficulty level is still absolutely punishing, and the bosses in particular are beastly. But like the two arcade games that preceded it, *Super Ghouls 'N Ghosts* is tough but never unfairly so. Capcom's classic game was converted to (and expanded for) the Game Boy Advance in 2002.

R-TYPE III: THE THIRD LIGHTNING

1993 · IREM LEVELS UP

Crippling slowdown ruined *Super R-Type,* so it's great to see it virtually eliminated here. *R-Type III* not only greatly refined the weapons and charging system of previous games, but also introduced two new Force devices. Fun fact 1: the sperm-like enemies found in the Japanese game on level two were replaced with eyeballs for the Western release. Fun fact 2: an HD remaster is now available.

MARIO'S SUPER PICROSS

1995 · PUZZLING WITH MARIO

Poor sales of *Mario's Picross* on Nintendo's Game Boy meant this excellent follow-up never hit the West on its original release (although it's now available via the Switch Online service). Played against the clock, the aim is to complete picross puzzles as quickly as possible. It's straightforward to play and certainly isn't the prettiest SNES game to look at, but it's a highly addictive game overall.

FINAL FANTASY VI

1994 · A RELIC TO TREASURE

Confusingly known as *Final Fantasy III* in the West, this is arguably the best 2D game in the series and is epic in both its scope and its storytelling. *Final Fantasy VI* features 14 playable heroes, has a surprisingly complex story, interesting character arcs and offers a large amount of customisation via the use of Relics. Like the other 2D *Final Fantasy* games, it had a *Pixel Remaster* update in 2023.

THE FIREMEN

1994 · HOT TO TROT

This engaging action game takes place during a Christmas party and sees a pair of firefighters tackling an out-of-control fire. It's essentially a slick shoot-'em-up with hero Pete having to avoid heat while trying to work out how to extinguish the unique fire attacks of each enemy boss. Interestingly, the game never came out in the United States, which may explain its current high price.

SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS

1996 · MARIO'S FIRST RPG

This late offering from Square has spawned two spiritual franchises: the *Paper Mario* series and *Mario & Luigi*. Immediately distinctive thanks to its isometric viewpoint and rendered visuals, *Super Mario RPG* boasts a strong story, lots of familiar characters from the Mushroom Kingdom and an extremely robust battle system featuring the now-familiar timed button presses of the later *Mario* RPGs. It was remade for the Switch in 2023.

» [SNES] Each stage is packed with invention. It's not just about platforming and stomping enemies.

SUPER MARIO WORLD

1990 · PLUMBING NEW HEIGHTS

To say that Nintendo set the bar impossibly high with the original SNES pack-in game would be an understatement. It arrived along with the console, and yet despite the many hundreds of games that followed it, *Super Mario World* still routinely tops 'best SNES game' lists. It remains a brilliant calling card for the console, being a massive graphical improvement over *Super Mario Bros 3* and still managing to expand on that game's sprawling world map. While it adds several new game mechanics, including the introduction of lovable sidekick Yoshi, it's the meticulous level design that makes Nintendo's game still such a joy to play. The game's producer Shigeru Miyamoto claims this is his favourite-ever *Mario* game – and who are we to argue with the master?

SUPER STREET FIGHTER II: THE NEW CHALLENGERS

1994 · THE NEXT ROUND

» [SNES] Move over Ryu and Ken. The new challengers battle it out in *Super Street Fighter II.*

Street Fighter II* hit the SNES *hard. It hit the console three times in three years, with the original 1992 game and 1993's *Turbo* edition paving the way for this highly anticipated release. It is more than an incremental update, however, boasting a host of additions that are worthy of the 'Super' prefix. The game features a brand-new scoring system, includes new Time Challenge and Group Battle modes and introduces four brand-new fighters to the arena: Cammy, T Hawk, Fei Long and Dee Jay. To accommodate all this extra content the game required a huge 32-megabit cartridge. To many fans, this remains the definitive SNES *Street Fighter* – although it would not be the last. *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* skipped the SNES, but perhaps surprisingly, *Street Fighter Alpha 2* was released for the console in 1996.

» [SNES] *Super Tennis* really comes into its own when you play a doubles match.

SUPER TENNIS

1991 · SERVING UP ACES

Nintendo's *Tennis* games were among the best sports titles available for the NES and Game Boy, so expectations were high for the SNES version. It might not be the best-looking game, but *Super Tennis* remains an excellent rendition of the sport. There are three game modes available, including the excellent doubles game, while Mode 7 is memorably used to show off the tennis court before each match and when you switch sides. It's the sheer number of moves available that really manages to impress, while the challenging AI ensures that matches always remain satisfying. It's also interesting that Nintendo didn't feel the need to stuff the game with its popular characters (Mario doesn't ever appear as umpire this time), yet the game is still hugely fun to play.

» [SNES] Rambi The Rhinoceros makes jungle traversing a whole lot easier.

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

1994 · JUNGLE BOOGIE

» [SNES] Donkey and Diddy explore the hidden depths in search of secret stuff.

Here we have a game that looks so good, we couldn't believe it was really running on the SNES (and if you read our Q&A with designer Gregg Mayles, it appears we weren't alone in that assumption). Yes, it features sensational pre-rendered visuals that bring all the characters to life, but at its heart is a truly excellent platformer. It features the ability to play with a second character, Diddy Kong, and also adds a number of animal companions to the mix. Plus, David Wise's catchy music provides the perfect soundtrack to the platforming action. The game was a huge commercial hit, going on to sell more than nine million copies. This success led to a couple of SNES sequels in 1995 and 1996, but the original remains our favourite.

RARE GOES APE

LEAD DESIGNER GREGG MAYLES TALKS DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

How did* Donkey Kong Country *come about?

We were experimenting with a very early form of 3D technology before *Donkey Kong Country* began, but actually trying to implement an ambitious method into a real game situation was difficult. At the time, software houses outside Japan were producing graphics that were considered superior to those produced inside Japan. Nintendo visited us and we demonstrated a proprietary graphics system that we were toying with, which became ACM (Advanced Computer Modelling). As a result Nintendo asked us to do a game using the Donkey Kong character.

So how did the ACM technology work?

Once the character was modelled in 3D we could view it at any angle and render out the frames of 3D animation that were then converted to 2D images. Previously, animation was extremely labour-intensive and required great artistic skill to get the angles and lighting correct. This new computer-assisted method enabled us to produce animation quicker, to a higher standard and with a previously unseen realistic look.

For the gameplay, were you inspired by any games in particular?

For me, *Super Mario Bros 3* was the ultimate pinnacle for 2D platform games. We wanted the same kind of structure, but we also wanted it to be extremely flowing – where a player could move effortlessly through the levels at great speed. Watching a skilled player in full flow on levels such as Barrel Cannon Canyon is probably the best example of this. If you time everything correctly, you can get through the level efficiently and impressively.

Tell us about the creation of Diddy Kong.

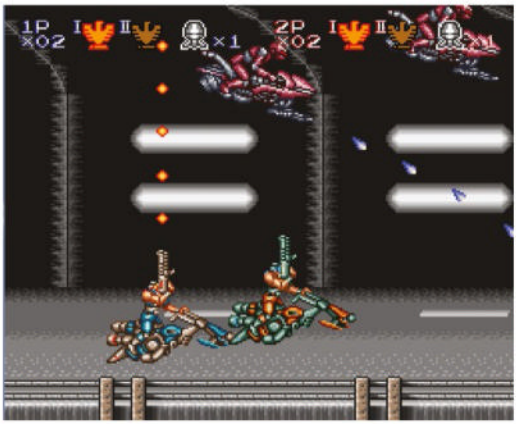
We initially wanted to include DK Junior as Donkey's sidekick. Diddy Kong was our update of Junior, but Nintendo felt that the character was too different. We felt that our new character perfectly suited the updated universe of *Donkey Kong* so we kept our character and gave him a different name.

Did Nintendo request any other changes or make suggestions?

Nintendo was extremely busy at the time so we were left to ourselves. It was an unprecedented thing for Nintendo to do, entrusting one of its most prominent and fondly remembered IPs with a relatively small and unknown UK development house. I was young and naïve enough not to realise just how crucial this game was for Rare – all I wanted to do was create a game that could be remembered. Miyamoto provided us with some suggestions for DK's look and it was a sketch of his that included the tie.

How was the reaction the first time you showcased the game?

DKC's announcement was made at the very end of a conference. People were expecting something big, but they thought it was going to be about the Nintendo 64. The game looked spectacular and I heard people around me saying that Project Reality (N64's development name) looked great. Then when it was announced it was a SNES game, there was a moment of stunned silence before everyone started clapping… apart from me, who was wondering how we were going to finish it on time.



» [SNES] Our heroes use their Jet Motorcycles to take on airborne enemies.

» [SNES] The side-on running and gunning is broken up by maze-like top-down overhead stages.

CONTRA SPIRITS

1992 · RUN-AND-GUN, GUN, GUN

You may know it better as *Contra III: The Alien Wars* or *Super Probotector: Alien Rebels*, but whatever the name, this is easily one of the best-ever *Contra* games. Providing everything you want from a great run-and-gun, the levels are tough but fair, there's an insane amount of over-the-top weaponry to choose from and the relentless assault from bosses never lets up. While the Mode 7 levels are showing their age, the side-on stages remain as fresh as ever, proving that developer Konami was in a league of its own when it came to running and gunning. And don't forget the thunderous, bombastic soundtrack that perfectly matches the on-screen carnage.

HOW THE ALIEN WARS BEGAN

NOBUYA NAKAZATO ON THE CREATION OF CONTRA SPIRITS

How did you find the SNES as a platform to develop games for?

The SNES itself was a relatively easy piece of hardware to work with. That fact, plus getting the teams that developed games like *Gradius III* and *Ganbare Goemon* to share what they had learned, allowed for a smooth development.

How did you approach the SNES' Mode 7 when planning the game?

I ran various tests for Mode 7 content in the run-up to planning the project. As I looked over the results, I came up with ideas for how to apply them. Konami had also started releasing arcade games, such as *A-Jax*, with rotation features, so I looked at those as well.

How did you come up with the bosses, and which is your personal favourite?

The inspiration for those ideas came from all sorts of things – films, novels, museum exhibits… My favourite is the final boss, whose attack pattern changes according to a roulette.

What was your inspiration behind the game's intense soundtrack?

I asked the sound team for a heavy-hitting sort of sound like you find in Hollywood movies. In particular, for the boss rush at the end of the game, we paid a lot of attention to making it more immersive by having the music change seamlessly according to what was going on in the game.

If you could only take either* Contra Spirits *or your Mega Drive game* Contra: Hard Corps *to a desert island, which would you choose?

That sure is a tough question, but by means of going back to the roots, I'd choose neither and bring the NES *Contra* with me.

» [SNES] *Super Turrican 2* must rival *Contra Spirits* for the number of explosions in a single game.

SUPER TURRICAN 2

1995 · TWICE THE BURN

This is not the SNES version of the 1991 computer game *Turrican II: The Final Fight*. Rather it's the *sixth* game in the revered run-and-gun series. Compared to 1993's *Super Turrican*, the sequel dispenses with the large open world of the original game, but this simply allows developer Factor 5 to up the ante in every department and present a rival to the *Contra* series. It features sensational graphics, employs extensive use of Mode 7 effects and boasts a roster of gigantic bosses. What's more, the game never lets up and yet players will experience little to no slowdown. Make no mistake, it can be pretty damn difficult at times, but as shooters go it's hard to beat for sheer jaw-dropping spectacle.

CYBERNATOR

1992 · SHOCK AND AWE-SOME

Known in Japan as *Assault Suits Valken, Cybernator* is a bombastic run-and-gun that has you stomping around huge playing areas in a gigantic mech. Your armoured death machine has a convincing weight to it as it trundles around causing destruction, while constant enemy assaults keep you on your toes. M2 released a remaster in 2023 called *Assault Suits Valken Declassified*.

» [SNES] Few moments on the SNES are as relaxing as catching thermals with a hang-glider.

PILOTWINGS

1990 · UP, UP AND AWAY

Designed to showcase the SNES' Mode 7, *Pilotwings* looked absolutely spectacular on release, offering incredible rotating environments that really immersed you in Nintendo's game. It's a flight sim that focusses on arcade thrills and culminates in a dangerous rescue mission using a heavily armed chopper. For many though, the defining moment of *Pilotwings* will be endlessly circling thermals in the delightfully relaxing hang-gliding event. Sequels arrived on the N64 and 3DS in 1996 and 2011.

PIECES

1994 · PUZZLES WERE NEVER THIS FUN

A competitive puzzle game sounds like a terrible idea for a videogame, until you start playing it. Successfully placing pieces increases your power gauge, which gives you access to a large number of power-ups that can help you or hinder your opponent. The images are a little low-res, but it never affects your progress and there's a large number of pictures to put together. We'd recommend playing a friend as the AI gets quite challenging.

SUPER DOUBLE DRAGON

1992 · MOVE OVER FINAL FIGHT

Don't be fooled by its garish visuals, as behind the dumpy sprites is a truly exceptional fighting engine. A guard button is added to the mix, which really opens up on the higher difficulty levels, while the punch, kick and jump buttons can be utilised to pull off a staggering number of moves. This is the SNES' best scrolling fighter, but get the Japanese version as it's not been neutered like the Western releases.

» [SNES] Arc System Works has rereleased *Super Double Dragon* on a compilation that features the Japanese *and* US versions of the game.

TERRANIGMA

1995 · THE SNES EPIC THAT NEVER REACHED AMERICA

While not as expensive as *EarthBound* or *Chrono Trigger*, Quintet's excellent action RPG is no less desirable and is crying out for a remake. *Terranigma* boasts a well-crafted story that stands apart from many similar RPGs of the time and also features an excellent real-time battle system. There's a solid and interesting magic system to get to grips with too, along with plenty of memorable boss encounters. A late PAL release in 1996 means it's now very hard to secure.

SUPER ALESTE

1992 · BULLET HEAVEN

Many early shmups like *Gradius III* and *Super R-Type* were plagued by slowdown on the SNES. That wasn't the case with *Super Aleste*, which throws about sprites with gleeful abandon and even has time for some extremely funky Mode 7 effects. Developed by Compile, *Super Aleste* has eight different weapons to collect and power-up, a large number of stages and some suitably gigantic bosses. It's known as *Space Megaforce* in the US and is missing several music tracks.

» [SNES] As well as some stunning use of Mode 7, Konami's game also has a killer score.

SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV

1991 · WHIP-CRACKING FUN

It might feel a little linear at times, but this remains a superb update of the original game, with a great array of terrifying bosses, lots of interesting weapons and a truly atmospheric soundtrack – one of the SNES' best, in fact. It's all rounded off by smart Mode 7 effects and extremely satisfying level design.

GHOULISHILY GOOD

MASAHIRO UENO ON KONAMI'S SNES SEQUEL

When did you start work on* Super Castlevania IV*?

I think we started it almost as soon as we got the information from Nintendo, so we probably started the development in 1989. We started with a small R&D team, without actual dev kits. We only had a hard copy of specification documents.

Was there much pressure?

The expectations were really high, as it was already a successful franchise and now on the new 'super' hardware. Personally, I liked the original *Castlevania* the most back then. Of course, I played them all before we finalised the direction of *Castlevania IV*. I wanted to make it into a pure action game without any RPG elements, similar to the original *Castlevania*.

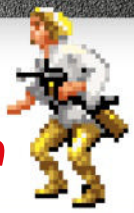
How did you create* Super Castlevania IV*?

Because the team was small, everybody was involved in the design. Some ideas came from creative artists and others were from programmers' experiments. The whip feature was a big part of the game and it was experimented with and implemented by Yaipon. We drew maps on paper but I think we changed a lot as we iterated the game.

Where did the bosses originate?

I came up with rough boss ideas first and then [additional] programmers came up with more detailed patterns as they implemented. We wanted to make earlier bosses relatively easy so that the players could figure out weak points and effective weapons without retrying too many times. For some bosses and traps we decided to use Mode 7 first, then came up with ideas. I like the Golem boss, simply because it uses Mode 7.

SUPER STAR WARS



1992 · THE FORCE IS STRONG WITH THIS ONE

Forget the two sequels, this is the *Star Wars* game you should go for.

The difficulty is perfectly pitched compared to the later games; you can switch between characters on certain stages; and there are some excellent Mode 7 driving and flying sections. The bosses are big and challenging and the rendition of John Williams' classic score is superb.

» [SNES] Although you start off as Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and Chewbacca are also playable.

EXPANDING STAR WARS

KALANI STREICHER ON TACKLING THE SUPER NES TRILOGY

How did the* Super Star Wars *games come about?

My vision was to create the first trilogy on a single platform for our fans. We were slightly behind the curve getting onto the SNES, though in the end we pulled off the release of each game from the *Star Wars* trilogy back-to-back, year after year, which I'm very proud of.

What were the games that inspired you while working on* Super Star Wars*?

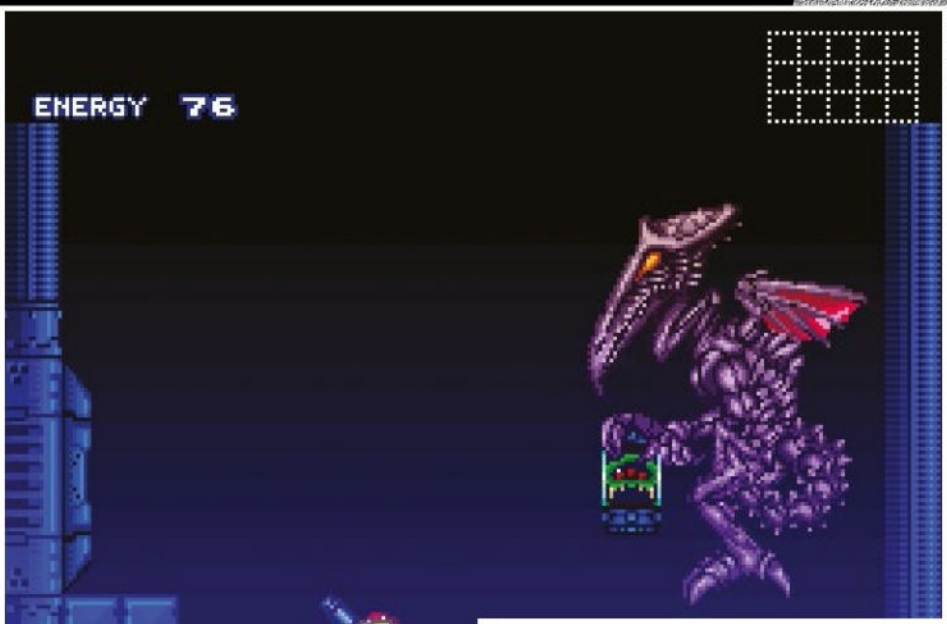
I was a big fan of platform games and side-scrollers. *Contra, Super Castlevania IV, Turrican* and *Mega Man* on the SNES were my favourite games. I was also playing the *Willow* arcade game, which inspired me to push the visual quality on the SNES above other games. I wanted it to be as good a side-scroller as *Contra* or *Castlevania*, with the visual quality of arcade games such as *Willow* or *Street Fighter*, and vehicle gameplay using Mode 7 as seen in *F-Zero*.

Did you have much access to the Star Wars vault?

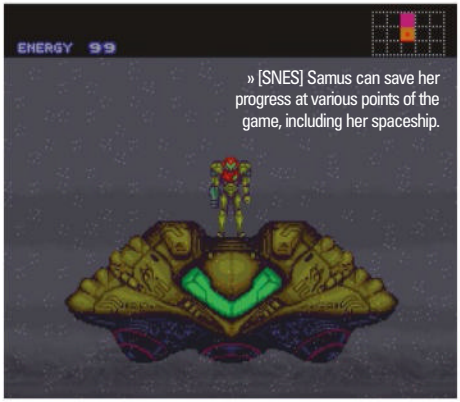
I looked at every aspect of the movie in detail with the team and pointed out the environments and characters I wanted in the game. We used reference materials and photos from Lucasfilm's photo library, and took reference pictures of the actual movie models from the Lucas Archives. Everybody on the team was a hardcore *Star Wars* fan. I was also producing the *X-Wing* game at the same time, which added even more extensive research of every spacecraft and ship in the game. I was heavily entrenched in getting the authenticity of the *Star Wars* universe into these games.

Was there much interference from Lucasfilm?

We were in control of all creative aspects of the game such as game design, art and animation, and Sculptured was responsible for coding the game.



» [SNES] *Super Metroid*'s atmospheric opening sets the tone for the rest of the game.

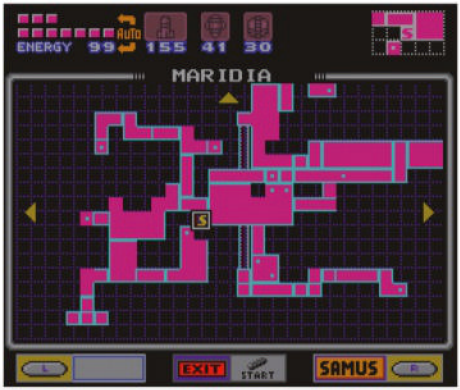


» [SNES] Samus can save her progress at various points of the game, including her spaceship.

SUPER METROID

1994 · 16-BIT SAMUS IS THE BEST SAMUS

Yoshio Sakamoto's stunning sequel to *Metroid II* is a wonderfully atmospheric game that remains highly influential today. Samus' abilities are exceptionally well crafted, allowing the world of Zebes to slowly open up, and there are plenty of secrets to discover thanks to the excellent design. The game's bosses are challenging, without ever feeling unfair, and often hark back to earlier games in the series, while the minimalist sound design and evocative visuals add to the game's rich atmosphere. *Super Metroid* is a game you feel as much as you play and it's lost nothing of its impact in the last 30-odd years. The Western release is notable for its larger box and included strategy guide and has become quite the collector's item as a result.



THE EVOLUTION OF SUPER METROID

YOSHIO SAKAMOTO ON THE CREATION OF NINTENDO'S EXCEPTIONAL SEQUEL

How did the Game Boy* Metroid *influence your work on* Super Metroid*?

As the last scene depicted Baby Metroid being born right in front of Samus' eyes… well… there's no real explanation for that in the course of the games, but that scene was another source of incentive for us in that we wanted to follow on from that ending, linking *Metroid II* with *Super Metroid*. We were determined to keep the same world view and maintain the continuity of the story.

What can you tell us about the prototype stage of the game?

For the prototype stage of *Super Metroid*'s development we just had a few Intelligent Systems programming staff, myself, and another [in-house] Nintendo designer. We examined what was possible in the game, and as the core *Metroid* system was already in place we considered how we could make the game easier to play, what new ideas we could incorporate, and so on… Then we drafted in lots of other NCL and Intelligent Systems developers once we got beyond that stage and into the proper work.

Why do the* Metroid *games look so different to other Nintendo games of the time?

I think the film *Alien* had a huge influence on the production of the first *Metroid* game. All of the team members were affected by HR Giger's design work, and I think they were aware that such designs would be a good match for the *Metroid* world we had already put in place. To be honest, I've never really been clear on what is or isn't the 'Nintendo look', but as far as we were concerned, we were just projecting another image from within Nintendo – another face of Nintendo, if you like. But yes, it's a science-fiction game, so…

Super Metroid is graphically impressive – how was this achieved?

We used all seven of the hardware modes available. We achieved wonderful graphics and sound by dedicating most of the memory to those features. Oh, and the game's maps were also quite large, I think. We made good, balanced use of the 24 megabits, anyway – that much I know for sure.

How difficult is it to create balance in a game like* Super Metroid*?

In a stage following on from an area where the player made lots of discoveries, we'd hold back from pushing the player too far in order to avoid repetition. Balance between difficulty level and player discoveries was crucial. We wanted to avoid creating an on-rails experience – we wanted the player to feel free. But it was incredibly difficult to get that balancing act right. We'd been designing levels in this way since the first game, so we had a lot of experience but we still needed to experiment and build and rebuild.

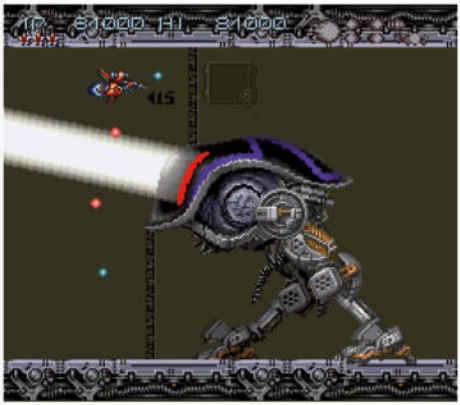
Do you have any anecdotes about* Super Metroid*'s development you can share?

There were always between 10 and 15 of us in the office through the night, so we had to take naps in turns. The nap room wasn't being cleaned or looked after at all, because we were always using it; one morning staff from another area came to wake us up and told us that the room smelled like a zoo. Another Nintendo employee put a room freshener in the nap room, but that only made the place pong even worse. Everyone in Nintendo gave us funny looks. [Laughs] It's quite sad having only these kinds of memories!

SUPER BOMBERMAN 5

1997 · HAVING A BLAST

Hudson Soft's final SNES release was a fantastic way to move on from the console and also conclude the *Super Bomberman* series. The single-player mode showcases worlds based on the earlier series entries, while the multiplayer mode is entertaining, featuring nine characters and ten maps. This was not released outside Japan until it was included in the *Super Bomberman Collection* in 2026.



AXELAY

1992 · BURY THE HATCHET

Konami dominated the SNES with a constant range of astonishing games. *Axelay* remains one of the system's best shooters thanks to its well-crafted soundtrack, gob-smacking visuals and a clever weapon system that expands as the game progresses. The into-the-screen stages are critically lauded, but the side-on sections are just as satisfying. It's topped off by some of the best boss encounters to appear on the console.

SECRET OF MANA

1993 · MANA FROM HEAVEN

It's impossible to ignore Square RPGs on the SNES, and this is among the very best of the bunch (and one that received a PAL release to boot). *Secret Of Mana* is an action RPG that gets absolutely everything right, from the fantastic cast of characters to the distinctive levelling-up system. And who can forget the celebrated three-player co-op feature that provided the ideal excuse for buying a Super Multitap?

UN SQUADRON

1991 · SOAR TO GLORY

This is an excellent conversion of Capcom's coin-op shooter, even if it loses the two-player mode and chops some of the stages around. The military setting makes a nice change from the usual sci-fi backdrops that dominate other shmups, and there's an array of planes and weapons you can purchase. Oh, and if you didn't know, the game is based on a popular manga called *Area 88*.

SHADOWRUN

1993 · OUT OF THE SHADOWS

The SNES was home to many great RPGs but most originated in the East. *Shadowrun* bucked that trend, delivering an engrossing adventure that effortlessly translated the rules of the tabletop game to digital form. Beset by problems before release, it was eventually launched to critical acclaim. Like many SNES RPGs it commands a high price these days. Fortunately, the cheaper Japanese version features English-language text.

9001

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